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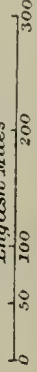
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THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE HOME AND THE CALL TO LEAVE IT.

1. INTRODUCTION. The Bible is the history of redemption. It shows in the opening chapters of Genesis how redemption became necessary, when man in the exercise of his freedom fell from obedience, from likeness to God, and from free communion with God. Redemption is the Divine method by which man recovers the communion he had lost, and is restored to the likeness of God. The Old Testament is the history of the working of this purpose of redemption. There we see it concentrating itself upon a chosen nation, the nation of Israel, of which Abraham was the Founder; then narrowing itself first from a nation to a "remnant" of that nation, and afterwards from the remnant to an individual, Jesus Christ, the Divine Redeemer, and Mediator between God and man. The New Testament contains the proclamation of redemption finally achieved by Christ, and the history of its effects, widening out first on the Apostles, then on the Church, and finally on the world at large—this ultimate expansion being the object aimed at throughout in the election, whether of a nation or of individuals. Abraham's importance in this history lies in this—that he was chosen by God to be the father and founder of that nation, which was to be the bearer of the promise of redemption, the subject of its first fulfil-

ment, and the instrument by which its grace was to come to all peoples.

The Bible is also a history of religion, that is, of God's gradual revelation of Himself to man, and of man's response to that revelation by worship and by conduct. The importance of Abraham in *this* history is, that he was chosen to receive the revelation of God as One and Supreme, and by his conduct at different crises in his life to proclaim his adherence to such a God, to testify before the world that God is, that God is One God, and that God is the Rewarder of those that serve Him.

2. ABRAM'S BIRTHPLACE (Gen. xi. 28 ; cf. Acts vii. 14). Abram was born about two thousand years before Christ,^a at Ur of the Chaldees. The country of the Chaldees, described in the Bible sometimes as Chaldea, and sometimes as Babylonia, lay some six hundred miles in a direct line eastward from the land of Canaan, where he afterwards settled. Situated in the lower part of the valleys of the Euphrates and the Tigris, a fertile, alluvial plain, stretching northward to the highlands of Mesopotamia, and southward to the shores of the Persian Gulf, Chaldea was the seat of the earliest civilisation in Western Asia. It had been peopled originally by a nation of the Turanian stock, who are known by the name of Accadians ; and long before the time of Abram, even before his forefathers, the Semites, entered the country, the earlier inhabitants had developed the arts of building and writing and government. And though they lost their political supremacy to the incoming Semites, yet, as has so often happened in history, they passed on their civilisation, their alphabet, and their religion to their conquerors. Chaldea, therefore, at the time of Abram's birth was a land full of large and populous towns, with a highly developed

^a The date of Abram's birth has by recent scholars been fixed approximately at 2150 B.C.

commerce and agriculture, and abounding in luxury and magnificence. The land was naturally fertile, especially in grain, and under a skilful system of tillage, combined with elaborate irrigation by canals, it yielded abundant support to a teeming population. Wealth and plenty were accompanied by culture and learning. Great palaces and temples testified to the inhabitants' knowledge of architecture, observatories to their interest in astronomy, public libraries in all the large towns to widespread popular education. Almost everyone could read and write. For books they used bricks, cylinders, or tablets of clay, upon which, while it was soft, the characters were impressed with a graver or stylus; and these after being baked in the sun became practically indestructible. Large numbers of these clay books have been discovered, and are now stored in the British and other Museums. Many of these have in recent years been deciphered and translated, and are found to contain calendars, mathematical and astronomical calculations, commercial records, and historical annals, as well as liturgies and other religious literature. There was a highly developed legal system in Chaldea; property was protected, conveyed, and bequeathed; judges were appointed throughout the kingdom. The city of Ur itself was not the least populous or magnificent in this great country. Its name signifies "The City," and it may have been the capital. It was situated probably on the right bank of the Euphrates, not far from its mouth, on a site now known as El-Mugheir.^a The name of the city may have been applied also to the surrounding district; and we cannot conclude that Abram's family were dwellers in the city; they

^a Other sites have been identified with it, *e.g.*, the modern Warka, a little further up the river; while some maintain that it was near Edessa in Upper Mesopotamia.

may have been shepherds or agriculturists in the neighbouring plain.

3. RELIGION IN CHALDEA. The Chaldeans were idolaters. They worshipped many gods—the moon, the sun, and the planets, as well as other deities which represented the forces of nature, and were known by various names. Their sacred literature consisted of stories of these gods, describing how they were descended one from another, how they lived and quarrelled and fought like men. They attributed to them neither justice nor purity nor love, but caprice and lust and cruelty. And though they had also many prayers and hymns breathing a devout and penitent spirit, yet as the character of a god reflects itself in the life of his worshippers, so the fruit of their worship was seen in a deeply degraded moral life. The Chaldeans practised the cruelties and immoralities which they ascribed to their gods themselves. The very temples were the scene of frequent murders in the name of human sacrifice, and of other abominations in the name of worship. The city of Ur was specially dedicated to the Moon-god, and contained a magnificent temple, the ruins of which have been discovered in our own day.

4. ABRAM'S DESCENT AND FAMILY. Abram's father was Terah the son of Nahor. According to the list given in Genesis he was ninth in descent from Noah, as Noah was ninth in a direct line from Adam. He had three sons, Haran, Nahor, and Abram, among whom Abram was probably the youngest; he is named first, however, because for the purpose of the sacred historian he is the most important, the one with whom the subsequent history is to be concerned.^a Of Haran we know only that he died "in the presence," *i.e.*, in the lifetime of his father, and before the family left Ur of the Chaldees; and also that he left a son, Lot, and two

^a Cf. Gen. xxv. 9.

daughters, Milcah and Iscah, of whom the former became the wife of Nahor. The name "Abram," which the patriarch bore till he was very nearly a hundred years of age, signifies "great father," or "exalted father;" his wife's name, which like his own was afterwards changed, was Sarai. Some have thought that Sarai was the same as Iscah, and therefore Abram's niece; but he himself describes her as his half-sister, "the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother."

Terah and his family were idolaters like the people among whom they lived. We find Laban his great-grandson in possession of "Teraphim," or sacred images, which he speaks of as his gods (Gen. xxxi. 30); and Joshua, addressing the children of Israel at the close of his life, reminds them that their fathers who dwelt on the other side of the Euphrates in the old time, among whom he mentions Terah, "served other gods" (Josh. xxiv. 2). Thus Abraham was brought up in an idolatrous country, and in a home where the true God was not known or worshipped. In after-times the Jews invented many legends about his boyhood and youth, describing him as already in his early years a believer in the one true God, and enlarging on the persecutions which he suffered, and the courage with which he defied the idolaters and their king. But all this the Bible itself passes over in silence.

5. THE FIRST MIGRATION (Gen. xi. 31, 32; cf. Acts vii. 2-4). Within the short compass of one verse (Gen. xi. 31) is described a movement of great importance, the first migration of Terah's family from Chaldaea towards Canaan. Neither the period in Abram's life, at which it took place, nor the cause of the migration, nor the reason of its stopping short at Haran is even indicated here. The movement is ascribed to Terah. It may have been the effect of the nomadic instinct working in a family which had never planted itself firmly in

Chaldea. Or it may have been part of a general migration among the descendants of Shem, traces of which are found on the monuments of Upper Mesopotamia. Or again, it may have been due to a profession by Abram of faith in the one God, which, combined with attacks on the surrounding idolatry, would bring down persecution on himself and his family. It should be noted that Stephen in his sermon, reported in Acts vii., attributes this the first migration to the call of God, addressed to Abram ; on the other hand he seems to ascribe the subsequent removal from Haran to Canaan to the working of natural motives. Terah was accompanied in his migration by Abram and his wife Sarai, and by Lot the son of his dead son Haran. Nahor, the third of his sons, remained behind in Chaldea, but must have afterwards followed his father, since in Gen. xxiv. 10, we find his family settled in Mesopotamia. Leaving the rich and loamy flats of Chaldea, Terah, with his family and his servants would journey from one camping ground to another up the valley of the Euphrates towards the undulating tableland in the North-west. There at the foot of the great mountain-ranges which separate Syria from Armenia, they settled in the district of Mesopotamia.

6. SOJOURN IN HARAN. Haran (which must be distinguished from the Hauran, the region east of the Sea of Galilee) was a district of great fertility, well watered and abounding in rich pasture. In after days it became a famous centre of trade, standing on the caravan route between Tyre and Nineveh (cf. Ezek. xxvii. 23). In Abram's time it would be as it has now become again, a choice home for shepherd tribes, where the flocks and herds would find space and pasture and water in abundance. Here Terah fixed his new home, giving up any purpose he may have had of pushing on to Canaan. And here, after a life of two hundred and five years, he died.

No doubt he had prospered in that fertile land ; we find Abram, who had become head of the family, the master of a great household, and a man of wealth and substance.

7. THE CALL OF ABRAM—GOD'S SUMMONS (Gen. xii. 1-3). We do not know how long Abram continued to dwell in Haran. We are told only of the cause of his leaving it. When he was seventy-five years old, Abram heard the voice of God bidding him leave "his country, his kindred, and his father's house," and depart into another land.^a The object of this summons was dark enough to Abram, but is plain to us. One man was to be separated from all his surroundings and from his past, to be at once the recipient, the witness, and the channel of a true knowledge of God. He was to be settled in a country which by its natural character was similarly separated from the surrounding countries. Within this country, thus isolated from the outside world, Abram and his descendants were to be trained in the knowledge of God, the love of righteousness, and the pursuit of holiness. They and their land were to be types of holiness, the outward mark of which is separation. Their history was to be a history of religion, and they themselves depositaries of revelation ; until in the fulness of time in the same land, and from among the same people, He should appear, who was the perfect Revelation of God, and the perfect realisation of Holiness, in man.

8. THE CALL OF ABRAM—GOD'S PROMISE. It was not, however, only a bare summons which God addressed to Abram. God does not demand obedience of any man capriciously or arbitrarily, but always with some purpose of good to himself, and through him to others ; and by opening before him a prospect of the good that is to follow, graciously encourages him to obedience. Thus there is here added to the summons a great promise, letting Abram see,

^a R.V. in Gen. xii. 1.—"The Lord *said*" for A.V. "*had* said."

however dimly at first, the purpose in which he was to co-operate with God. This promise contained the assurance of three blessings waiting for Abraham in the future,—first, that God Himself would show him the land which was to be his future home; second, that he should become the founder of a great nation; and third, that he should be a cause of blessing to all the families of the earth. The full meaning of these assurances, especially of the last, could not be understood by Abram at the time; but they were sufficient when received by a believing heart, to induce him to cast himself on the guidance of God. The promises which were vague at the outset, were from time to time expanded and explained in answer to the obedient spirit in which Abram looked for their fulfilment.

9. THE CALL OF ABRAM—ABRAM'S FAITH (Cf. Heb. xi. 1, 8). Abram had faith in God. He recognised the voice that spoke to him as the voice of God, and acknowledged its authority. He heard the summons, and believed the promise. And he was prepared to "stake his future on the existence and faithfulness" of Him who thus communicated with him.^a The faith, like the promise, may have been but dim and indistinct at first; room was left for a growing faith in response to a growing revelation; but already Abram's faith was sufficient to grasp the promise and obey the summons. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews defines faith as the "substance" or "assurance" of things hoped for, the test of objects not seen; and he takes Abraham as a leading illustration of the office of faith. For faith is to the soul what sight is to the body; it apprehends unseen things as real, and future things as certain; and the power of it is to make a man act and live as if the future were already his, and the unseen continually before his eyes. So *by faith* Abram apprehended the ex-

^a Cf. Heb. xi. 6.

istence of God One and Supreme, and *by faith* he was convinced of the reality of the unseen blessings which lay in the future.

10. THE CALL OF ABRAM—ABRAM'S OBEDIENCE (Gen. xii. 4, 5). By faith also Abram obeyed, and leaving his country and his kin, "went out, not knowing whither he went." This prompt obedience was the proof of his faith; he adventured his life and his fortune on the assurance that God was guiding him,—a God whom no one recognised but himself. The home in Haran was abandoned. Accompanied by Sarai, and Lot, and with a great train of servants and dependants, with much goods and cattle, Abram set forth and journeyed first to the west, then southward to the promised land. The "great river, the river Euphrates" was crossed and left behind,—a passage from which, according to tradition, Abram afterwards took the name of Hebrew, the crosser, the man from beyond the river. Tradition also points to Damascus as a place on Abram's route, where he halted for a time; and where probably he fell in with that "Eliezer of Damascus," who became his steward or major-domo. Thence the caravan would pass on through Bashan, till having crossed the Jordan a few miles south of the sea of Galilee, it would ascend the opposite slopes of Gilboa, and enter at once into the heart of Canaan.

QUESTIONS AND POINTS FOR INQUIRY.

1. *When and in what circumstances did Abram's descendants return to Chaldea?*

2. *Illustrate connection between God's commands and God's promises. Cf. Matt. xi. 28-30; John xiv. 2 ff.; vii. 17.*

3. *Distinguish between "faith," "belief," and "trust." Which is the most comprehensive term? and why?*

CHAPTER II.

CANAAN AND EGYPT.

11. THE LAND OF PROMISE. As Abram was the chosen man, so Canaan was the chosen land, chosen by God to be the scene of the working out of His divine plan. We can see now how admirably it was adapted to be the scene of the history of redemption and of religion. It was *central*. For though in a map of our modern world, Palestine occupies only an obscure corner, it was planted at the very centre of the ancient world. It lay at a point where Asia, Africa, and Europe may be said to meet, and midway between the seats of the earliest civilization, in the valley of the Euphrates and the valley of the Nile. Whatever knowledge, religious force, or spiritual influence was gathered and stored in a country so situated, would, when the proper time came, radiate with the greatest rapidity from the Holy Land over the whole world. But Canaan was also *secluded*, fenced off from the rest of the world, by the desert on the east, and on the west by the sea, in early days as great a barrier as the desert. The highways from the Euphrates to the Nile, either passed by Canaan on the east, or crossed the country at its centre, leaving the inhabitants dwelling on the high ground comparatively undisturbed. Again, the country was *fertile*, producing enough to support a laborious population, yet not enough to encourage luxury or idleness, or to render the spirit of the people independent of the Providence of God.

The district, which was afterwards to be peopled by the descendants of Abram, was a narrow strip of mountainous country, about the size of Wales, stretching like a bridge from north to south, between the desert of Arabia and the plain of Syria. On the east it descended steeply to the valley of the

Jordan and the Dead Sea, on the west in gentle slopes to the plain of the sea-coast. It was a land of grey limestone ridges, and rounded green hills, of intersecting valleys, covered after rain with fresh succulent grass, and a spangled carpet of brilliant flowers; "a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths, springing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley and vines and fig-trees and pomegranates, a land of oil, olives and honey" (Deut. viii. 7, 8); but a land also where from time to time "the harvest of the field perished, the vine withered, and the fig-tree languished" (Joel i. 12), and famine was very grievous.

12. THE INHABITANTS OF CANAAN. At the time when Abram entered Canaan, "the Canaanite was then in the land." The earlier inhabitants, whom the Canaanites had dispossessed, had been driven to the mountains, the caves, or the outskirts of the country, where we find them at different points of the subsequent history under the names of Rephaim, Zuzim, Emim, or Anakim. The name Canaanite, which is given to their successors, probably their conquerors, seems to have been both a special name of a single tribe, and a general name for a great number of related tribes, who all traced their descent from Canaan, one of the sons of Ham (Gen. x. 6, 15-20). A list of these tribes is frequently given in the Pentateuch, bearing names derived, some of them from the town or district where they dwelt, others from the character of their locality or their manner of life. Thus the AMORITES were Highlanders, living mainly in the mountainous districts of the land, a warlike and savage people. In contrast to them are the HITTITES, more peaceable and advanced in civilisation, living in settled communities. Abram's allies in war are Amorites; but when he desires peaceably to obtain possession of a plot of ground he turns to the Hittites. Connected with them were the HIVITES, the midlanders, who

dwelt in the heart of the country, loving peaceful occupations, such as agriculture and trading pursuits. Though according to the genealogical table in Gen. x., these Canaanite tribes were descended from Ham, they seem by this time to have adopted a Semitic language, not far different from the Hebrew. For we find Abram holding free and unhindered intercourse with those peoples which he found in the land ; and the names alike of places and of people which occur in the narrative are Hebrew in their character.

Like the Chaldeans the Canaanites were worshippers of many gods. Their religion was the worship of the forces of nature under diverse forms and names. Centuries later, there were still vestiges of the old idolatrous religion to be found in the land, in the 'high places,' sacred groves, and sites consecrated to Baal, as also in the recurring disposition of the Israelites to fall back from the pure worship of Jehovah upon the rites and practices of their Canaanite predecessors. This worship of many and false gods was accompanied, as appears only too clearly from the story in Genesis, by great moral corruption, effeminacy and depravity of social life. Nevertheless, there were still some indications of a purer religion being not extinct in the land. Abram entered it as a worshipper and servant of One Supreme God, and as such he was recognised and tolerated ; his references to his God and his faith are received with respect, and in Melchizedek at least he meets and acknowledges a 'priest of the most high God,' representing a tradition of true religion. Abram thus found in Canaan a place where he realised every day the separation between himself and his neighbours, and the distinction between their gods and his God, but a place also where in freedom and security he could practise his own religion, building altars and offering sacrifice to the Most High God alone.

13. ABRAM SOJOURNING IN CANAAN. (Gen. xii. 6-9). The first place in the Promised Land where the Patriarch halted for a season in his wanderings was Sichem or Shechem, a narrow valley of great beauty, hemmed in between the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim, in the very heart of central Palestine. Here beside a famous tree, the "oak" or "terebinth" of Moreh, he halted his caravan, and pitched his black hair-cloth tents. The district was in the occupation of the Hivites, but the Canaanite population must down to this time have been thin and scattered. The land was unenclosed, and there were few towns. Abram passed freely through the country without coming into collision with the inhabitants already there. So he sojourned in the land of promise, dwelling in tents, ^a moving like other nomad families from pasture ground to pasture ground, as one after another became exhausted. From Sichem he removed, and journeyed southwards, to pitch again for a season on the high ground "east of Bethel," a district which is said to be "still one of the finest tracts of pasturage in the whole land."

14. THE NEW PROMISE (Gen. xii. 7). Abram's obedience in quitting his old home in Haran, and going forth in simple faith "not knowing whither he went," was rewarded by a new revelation and a new promise. The Lord appeared unto him at Sichem, and opening to him still further His purpose, proclaimed that *this* was the land, which should be possessed by his descendants. And without questioning how this was to be fulfilled to an alien and a childless man, Abram received the promise, and acknowledged his belief of it by building there an altar to the Lord, "who appeared unto him." Again at Bethel he built an altar, "and called on the name of the Lord," thus consecrating the successive stages of his journey, and by faith claiming

^a Cf. Heb. xi. 8-10.

for his descendants the land in which he himself was but a stranger and a sojourner. He dwelt in tents, established no permanent home. But in the altars which remained after his tents were struck, he displayed his faith that his heart had a home with God. Seeking the secret place of the Most High in prayer and worship, Abram learned that the Most High "prepared for him a city." Thus the moving tent and the abiding altar together symbolised the life of faith.

15. ABRAM IN EGYPT (Gen. xii. 10-20). The land of Canaan having no great rivers of its own, is and always has been dependent for water and for fertility upon its rainfall. The failure of rain for a few months in winter dries up the watercourses, and turns the country into a "dry parched land." The unnourished pastures wither away before the summer sun, and the shepherd tribes are driven to seek food for their flocks, as well as for themselves, beyond the border of the land. A calamity of this kind, a "famine," befel the country soon after Abram's arrival. The grass withered, the brooks failed, the flocks on which he and his household were dependent could not be fed. He learnt thus early in his walk with God, that God's favour does not ensure the continual abundance of earthly gifts, that even the chosen bearer of the promise was to be exposed to calamities and trials like other men. This lesson would be emphasised by the contrast with the land he had left. There would have been no fear of famine in Haran with its springs, and winding streams, and unfailing pastures. This was a sharp trial to his faith in the guiding hand which had led him forth from such a country, and left him so soon face to face with famine. If indeed he had been mindful of that country, from which he went out, he would now have had opportunity to return.^a But the new pro-

^a Cf. Heb. xi. 15.

mise was in his heart. This was the land God was to give to his seed ; and rather than risk unfaithfulness to the call by returning to his old home, he would seek a temporary refuge in a country where he would be still more clearly a stranger and a sojourner.

For when Canaan could no longer support the large household of the Patriarch, he turned his steps towards Egypt, the land whose river and whose system of irrigation rendered it independent of rainfall, and almost perpetually fertile. Thus Abram, fleeing from famine, showed the way in which his descendants so often followed him, until the time came when the Greatest of them was carried down into the same country to escape from the swordsmen of Herod. Yet the twenty centuries which separated Abram from Jesus form but a fragment of the history of that nation, "half as old as time." In Egypt Abram found himself once more in contact with a civilisation already old, even more ancient and more refined than that which he had left in Chaldea. But entering it as a foreigner, to remain in it only during a temporary emergency, there was less danger than there would have been in returning to Chaldea, of his becoming absorbed in another nation, and forgetting his call and his dependence upon God.

16. SARAI IN EGYPT. Nevertheless Abram had not yet fully realised what God's promise involved in watchful care over his safety, or with what complete dependence it pledged him to trust in God. On entering Egypt he was seized with fear of danger to himself from the beauty of his wife. The Egyptians were sensual and luxurious. Sarai was fair-skinned and comely. Some powerful personage might desire to have her for his own, and perhaps seek to put her husband to death that he might be free to seize his wife. Thinking more therefore of his own safety than of his wife's honour,

trusting less to God's protecting hand than to his own cleverness, Abram told Sarai to say she was his sister, from which it would be inferred that she could not be his wife. It was a half-truth, which is often "the more dangerous lie"; for she was half-sister to Abram, a relationship which in early ages was not thought a bar to marriage. Abram thought, no doubt, that any attempt by an ordinary citizen to obtain Sarai for his wife would then proceed openly and deliberately, and give him an opportunity to evade the proposal, and escape from the country. The event which he foresaw did occur, but in a form which defeated his precaution. The Egyptians, struck with the beauty of Sarai, carried the report of her to Pharaoh, the reigning king himself; and he, acting with oriental licence and royal disregard of ceremony, caused her to be carried at once to his palace. Then, relying on the assurance that she was Abram's sister, and as though preparing for an honourable marriage, Pharaoh sent to him the customary present or dowry paid to a bride's relations. Abram saw that his clever scheme had failed, and his conscience must have stung him when he saw arrive the "sheep and oxen, and men-servants, and maid-servants, and camels." But God interfered to protect His timorous servant from the consequences of his own folly. A mysterious sickness fell upon Pharaoh and his household, which was interpreted, either by his own conscience or by his diviners, as due to the presence of the foreign woman in his palace. The king thereupon sent for Abram, and having ascertained from him the true relation between himself and Sarai, rebuked him with scornful indignation for the deceit he had practised, and for the danger to which he had exposed the king of making another man's wife his own. He restored Sarai to Abram, permitted him apparently to retain the presents he had received, and dismissed him in safety; but the Patriarch,

who had fallen for the moment from his trust in God, went away bearing the scorn of the heathen but truth-loving king. He knew now the mistake he had made; his clever trick had failed, it had brought him into a danger even greater than that he sought to evade. Abram had learnt that God requires no double dealing in man to secure His purpose from being frustrated, and that deceit begets shame; he had learnt, on the other hand, that even from his own folly and its consequences, the same God was willing and able to deliver him.

17. **ABRAM'S RETURN TO CANAAN** (Gen. xiii. 1-4). We are not told how long Abram's visit to Egypt lasted. He left it with greatly increased wealth. Not only were his flocks and herds much larger, he had now asses and camels, gold and silver, and a largely increased following of men and women servants. At the head of such a household he had become a powerful man. From Egypt he moved first to the "Negeb," the "south country," lying between the highlands of Judah and the southern desert. Thence he advanced northwards "by stages," till at last he reached his old camping-ground between Bethel and Ai. His old altar, which he found standing there, must have been a sharp reminder of his temporary lapse of faith, of the mistake and the danger into which it led him, and of the delivering mercy of God. So once more, but with ripened experience and chastened recollection, he "called on the name of the Lord."

18. **SEPARATION** (Gen. xiii. 5-14). The very prosperity, which had come to the Patriarchal household, was the cause of the trial which followed. Abram's nephew, Lot, had accompanied him throughout his journeyings, and having his own share in the substance and stock of the camp, had shared in the general increase. At this point it became evident that the two households could no longer dwell together. Disputes would naturally

break out between the respective servants, disputes between the herdsmen about boundaries and wells and pasturage. Moreover, the large company journeying together, felt more than before the presence and pressure of the other dwellers in the district, the Canaanites and Perizzites. "The land was not able to bear them." Abram preferred separation to dispeace within one camp, and with equal dignity and generosity pointed out to Lot the necessity of their parting company, while he offered to him, though the younger and the inferior, the choice of the direction he would take. Standing side by side on that high ground near Bethel, on the crown of the watershed of the country, Abram and Lot together surveyed the land. The view which spread before them at this point has often been described. To the west and south there appeared only the bleak hills of Judea, rising in the extreme south to the ridge on whose slope lay Hebron. Northward, also, bare summits shut out from view the fertile valleys of central Palestine, such as Sichem. But at their feet opened a long and deep ravine, between whose widening sides were seen, far in the east, the rich green pasture lands of the Jordan valley. This was part of the "circle" or "round" of the Jordan, the lower reach of the river valley, "well watered" everywhere, almost tropical in the luxuriance of its vegetation. To the eye of Lot it looked like a very "garden of the Lord," reminding him of that teeming country of the Nile, where he had already so greatly prospered. His choice was quickly made. He accepted without demur the generosity of Abram, and without considering anything further than the prospect of gain and comfort and ease for himself, he chose "the circle of the Jordan." for his future home.

So Abram and Lot separated, Lot's readiness showing that he either knew little, or cared little about the spiritual wealth and knowledge of which Abram

was the possessor, about that promise which could not be divided or separated from the Patriarch's tent. Yet up to this time he had been Abram's heir, and to him Abram must have looked to be the means of the fulfilment of the promise "to his seed." On the other hand the choice which Lot made, proclaims that, in the pursuit of worldly prosperity, he would be undeterred by the danger of moral corruption to himself and his family. For the cities at the foot of the Jordan valley were full of iniquity. The natural richness and fertility of the district relieved the inhabitants from the necessity of much toil; and they were sunk in sensuality and vice. "Pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness, was in Sodom and her daughters,"^a and every evil lust of the flesh which these breed. Yet Lot fixed his encampment in the neighbourhood of Sodom, the most famous and most corrupt of these cities. He may have intended at first to avoid, as much as possible, contact with its inhabitants; but ere long he was drawn away by the attractions of the town; he relinquished his simple pastoral life, and became a citizen of Sodom, to acquiesce in its wickedness, and be all but involved in its judgment.

19. THE THIRD PROMISE TO ABRAM (Gen. xiii. 14-18). Abram had generously surrendered to Lot the right to choose in which part of the country he would fix his home; and by Lot's choice he himself was left with the bleak and comparatively unproductive uplands of Judah for his portion. But as between these upland ridges there were smiling and fertile valleys hidden, so below the grey surface of self-denial there was a glorious promise reserved for Abram. Lot had "lifted up his eyes" to choose a portion of the land for himself; but Abram was now bidden by God to lift up his eyes and behold the whole land as his

^a See Ezek. xvi. 49,50.

own. Wherever he looked, east or west, north or south, all that land was to belong to him and to his descendants. Thus was the promise concerning the land again more clearly defined; and on the other hand the promise concerning descendants was now separated from the promise of the land, and in turn expanded and defined; Abram was assured that his posterity should be as the dust of the earth in multitude. Acting on this new promise, with its invitation to use the land as his own, Abram traversed the country, till at length he found a more permanent resting-place "by the oaks" of Mamre, at Hebron, where again, for the third time, he "built an altar unto the Lord."

20. THE INVASION FROM THE EAST (Gen. xiv. 1-8). The Arâbah, as that deep trough was called, in the hollow of which lay the Jordan and the Dead Sea, and where Lot had chosen to fix his dwelling, was not only fertile but very populous. Near its centre, where the plain of the Jordan widened towards the shore of the Dead Sea, there were found at this time no fewer than five towns, Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Bela, afterwards called Zoar. These five were known collectively as the "cities of the plain." The control of this plain and of the Arâbah was always of importance to the great powers on the Euphrates, because through it ran the natural route from Damascus to Arabia, and so from Babylonia to the Red Sea and Egypt. Whatever power ruled on the Euphrates, it was part of its policy to keep open the way of communication for commerce with Arabia, or for military expeditions against the rival power of Egypt; and for that purpose to obtain political control over the "cities of the plain" and the neighbouring tribes. The ruling power in West Central Asia at this period was Elam,^a a country which extended over the rich lowlands east of the

^a Cf. Gen. x. 22; Is. xi. 11; Jer. xxv. 25, xlix. 39.

lower valley of the Tigris, and the mountainous district beyond. Accordingly, it was a king of Elam who, about the time of Abram's entrance into Canaan, had sent an expedition to subdue the cities of the plain. For twelve years these five towns had submitted to the yoke of this distant sovereign, and paid the annual tribute he imposed ; but in the thirteenth year they revolted. If they were counting on the distance, or on the indifference, of the king of Elam, they were disappointed. In the following year Chedorlaomer, then king of Elam, collected an army, and set out to chastise and reduce to subjection the rebels. His capital, Susa, lay almost on the same parallel of latitude with the Dead Sea, but the intervening desert made a long detour necessary, and in the course of his march up the Euphrates valley, Chedorlaomer gathered a number of other kings, his vassals or allies, with their armies—Amraphel, king of Shinar or Upper Chaldea, Arioch, king of Ellasar, and Tidal, king of "the nations."^a

With this large and formidable body of allied forces under his command, Chedorlaomer executed his purpose rapidly and thoroughly. He first attacked and defeated the tribes on the east of the Dead Sea ; the Rephaim,^b one of the aboriginal tribes of Canaan, whose chief stronghold was Ashteroth Karnaim—Ashteroth of the twin horns—so called after the goddess Astarte, whose symbol was the two-horned crescent moon ; the Zuzim,

^a It is generally supposed that in chap. xiv. we have one of the oldest documents in the Bible, an actual contemporary account of the events here narrated, incorporated in his work by the writer of the Book of Genesis. "Chedorlaomer" probably represents the Hebrew pronunciation of Kudur-Lagamar, which would mean "son" or "crown" of Lagamar, Lagamar being the name of an Elamite deity. For Shinar compare Gen. xi. 1. Ellasar was probably the Babylonian Lassa. For "king of nations" we should perhaps read king of Jutum, a country in the north-east of Babylonia, frequently referred to in Assyrian inscriptions.

^b Cf. Deut. ii. 20.

and the Emim, who are described in Deuteronomy (ii. 10) as "a people great and many and tall"; and finally the Horites, the rock dwellers in the neighbourhood of Petra and Mount Seir. At El-Paran, on the edge of the southern desert, having broken all resistance eastward of the Arâbah, Chedorlaomer turned northwards again, and marched along the west side of the valley, defeating the Amalekites and the Amorites on the way.^a Arrived now on the high ground of Judea overhanging the Dead Sea, the army must have passed within a short distance of Hebron, where Abram was dwelling; but their attention was fixed on the cities of the plains below, and they passed by, leaving Abram and his allies among the Amorites undisturbed.

21. DEFEAT OF THE FIVE KINGS (Gen. xiv. 8-12). Having thus swept the surrounding country, and deprived the cities of the plain of any support they might have looked for from the neighbouring tribes, Chedorlaomer descended from the high ground of Judah upon the "circle of the Jordan." The five kings had leagued themselves together for self-defence, and awaited the Elamite attack in the Valley of Siddim. It is the first battle recorded in sacred history. Chedorlaomer was victorious, and many of the defeated army, including, perhaps, the kings themselves of Sodom and Gomorrah, were caught and destroyed in the asphalt pits or wells which abounded in the plain. The rest escaped to the hills. The rout was complete. The victors pillaged the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah, and set out to return to Elam laden with prisoners and spoil.

22. ABRAM RESCUES THE CAPTIVES (Gen. xiv. 12-16). Among the prisoners whom Chedor-

^a Hazon-Tamar was the former name of En-gedi, a difficult and important pass, which they must have forced if they had marched so far along the shore of the Dead Sea, or found necessary to seize, if on the other hand, they had kept the high ground all the way from Kadesh.

laomer carried off from Sodom, Abram's nephew Lot, was included. The news of the disaster and of the captivity of his kinsman was brought by one of the fugitives to Abram, as he was dwelling beside the oaks of Mamre. Without hesitation or delay the Patriarch collected all of his household who were capable of bearing arms, and, accompanied probably by Eshcol, Mamre, and Aner, his Amorite allies, with their dependants, set out in pursuit of the retiring army. In spite of his promptitude, the invaders had gained a considerable start, and it was not till they had reached the northern border of Canaan at Dan, some one hundred and twenty miles from Sodom, and near the head-waters of the Jordan, that Abram overtook them. There, however, he fell upon the host under cover of night, routed the unprepared and encumbered troops, and pursued them as far as Hobah, a few miles north ^a of Damascus. His success was so complete that he recovered all the spoil which had been carried off, together with the prisoners, and what was of chief consequence to him, his nephew, Lot, with his family. It should have been a sharp lesson to Lot on the foolishness of uniting his fortunes with a people so sunk in wickedness as the dwellers in Sodom. But he disregarded the warning, and returned with his family to abide in the "city of destruction."

23. GRATITUDE OF THE KING OF SODOM (Gen. xiv. 17-24). On his return from this notable exploit, Abram was met at Shaveh,^b "the King's Dale" by the King of Sodom, who came to express his gratitude to the stranger chieftain for the great service he had rendered to the cities of the plain.

^a "The left hand" signifies the north, since primitive peoples in taking their bearings always faced the east, the sun-rising.

^b The site has not been identified; it was probably not far from Salem, and if the latter is taken as Jerusalem, then the King's Dale might correspond to the spot mentioned in 2 Sam. xviii. 18, where Absalom set up his monument.

He even proposed that Abram should restore only the captives he had rescued, and keep for himself all the property and the spoil. But Abram refused. He was not going to take payment for the victory he had won in seeking to deliver his kinsmen; there could be no trafficking between the representative of this decaying pagan race, on which the wrath of Heaven had just begun to fall, and the representative of a new consecrated race, to which God's mercy was already pledged. Abram did not surrender the claim of his allies, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre, to a share in the booty, but for himself he swore with a solemn oath before "the Lord, the Most High God, the possessor of heaven and earth," that he would receive nothing. This king should not have cause to say afterwards, "I have made Abram rich." He had acted as God's servant, and God alone should reward him.

24. MELCHIZEDEK (Gen. xiv. 8-10; cf. Heb. vii. 1-17). In contrast to the dignified reserve with which he thus treated the king of Sodom, was Abram's attitude towards Melchizedek, king of Salem. He also came forth to meet the returning victor, bringing with him bread and wine to refresh the fighting men and the rescued prisoners; he blessed Abram in the name of "the Most High God, possessor of heaven and earth," and gave thanks to the same God for the great victory just achieved. And Abram received both the gift and the blessing from the hand of this stranger, and delivered to him in return tithes, or a tenth part of all the spoil. Then this mysterious figure disappears into the darkness from which it started out, and we hear no more of Melchizedek. Only, a thousand years later, the Psalmist speaks of the Messiah as "a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps. cx. 4); and again, after another thousand years the writer of the Epistle to the

Hebrews, quoting from the same Psalm, enlarges upon this king of Salem as a type of Christ.

There is much about this mysterious personage to rouse interest and excite speculation. His place, his name, his office, his God, and his relation to Abram are all significant. He was King of Salem, which is "king of peace." The situation of Salem is not certain. Some would place it on the east of Jordan, on the route between Damascus and Sodom, others in the Jordan valley near to Bethshan, on the slopes of Gilboa. But it has all along been the general opinion among Jews and Christians alike, that it was the same as Jebus, the stronghold of the Jebusites, which afterwards became the site of Jerusalem. It would lie not far from Abram's route of return to Hebron; the same name is certainly given to Jerusalem in Ps. lxxvi. 2; and in the name of its king there is a parallel to the name of a later king in Jerusalem, Adoni-Zedek (Josh. x. 1). The name of Melchizedek, which is Semitic in character, signifies "king of righteousness," (Hebrews), or "just king" (Josephus). But Melchizedek was not only a king, he was a priest, "priest of God Most High."^a Like many early kings he combined the regal and the sacerdotal office. But his priesthood was not of any of the deities, who in the eyes of the Canaanites shared the power of heaven, and the worship of earth; it was a priesthood of "God Most High" (El Elyon), one God and Supreme, "Maker^b of heaven and earth," the same whom Abram acknowledged as *his* God, adding the same name and description in his oath before the King of Sodom. Abram therefore recognised in this King of Salem, unconnected with the stock of the Patriarch, perhaps not even a descendant of Shem, a fellow-worshipper of the One God, isolated in the surrounding polythe-

^a So R.V. for "the priest of the Most High God."—A.V.

^b R.V. *margin*, for A.V. "possessor."

ism. It is still more remarkable that he acknowledged him as a spiritual superior, one nearer God than himself. In offering him the tithes he acknowledged his priesthood ; he who had the promise suffered himself to be blessed by this stranger. Whence came this rank, this authority, or this knowledge of the Most High God,^a we cannot tell. But the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews takes the priesthood of Melchizedek for an indication of the existence of another dispensation alongside of the Mosaic, independent of the Patriarchal line, superior to the dispensation embodied in Abram, and so typical of the priesthood of Christ. And the figure appearing so mysteriously for a moment, whose ancestry and family, birth and death, remain alike unrecorded, he takes as a type of the eternal Son of God.

25. ABRAM'S POSITION AND CONDUCT. We have now seen Abram enter Canaan, not to conquer it for himself, but to sojourn in the land, and to claim it by faith for his descendants. He has prospered exceedingly, and has become a powerful domestic prince, whose alliance is welcomed by the Amorite chieftains, and whose skill and promptitude are effective in defence of the whole country. As regards his inner life we have seen how the faith, as yet imperfectly realising his relation to God, betrayed its weakness in Egypt ; how it appeared in restored vigour, as the secret of the generosity with which he treated Lot. We may see it working again as the foundation of that character which displayed itself in promptitude, resource, and courage in danger ; dignified independence of spirit, which bowed before the priest of the Most High God, but refused to treat with the King of Sodom even as an equal. Abram's faith enabled him to be helpful towards men, while it kept him exalted above men.

^a This name is found again in the song of Moses (Deut. xxxii. 8), in the story of Balaam (Numbers xxiv. 16), and in some of the Psalms. It occurs also in Phœnician inscriptions.

FURTHER POINTS AND QUESTIONS.

1. *Trace the importance in the history of Israel, of Shechem, Bethel, and Hebron.*
2. *Opinions of different nations on the importance or duty of truthfulness.*
3. *Who were the Canaanites? Ascertain their relation to the Philistines and the Phœnicians.*
4. *What light is thrown on Lot's character (a) by his going to Sodom in the first instance, (b) by his return to it.*
5. *Illustrate from this chapter, Hebrews xi. 1.*

CHAPTER III.

THE COVENANT OF PROMISE.

26. **THE FOURTH PROMISE** (Gen. xv. 1-6). Abram had now reached the highest point of his influence, and of his worldly wealth. He had made himself respected by his friends and feared by his foes. But the very unexpectedness and completeness of his success now seemed to threaten him with a new danger, while the earthly wealth with which he was surrounded, only served to emphasise the continued absence of the one thing on which his heart was set. Almost involuntarily he had acted as a shield to the country in which he was a stranger, and though he had been momentarily successful in defeating the invaders, the Elamites could hardly suffer such a defeat to pass unavenged, and on Abram their anger would surely fall. And what hope had he of again defeating so great a power? On the other hand, he had returned even from his great victory not richer by a "shoe-latchet" than he went forth. He may have suspected, if he did not detect, a contemptuous wonder in the minds

of his followers. They had seen him proudly refuse the reward of men; and there was as yet no reward of God to which he could point to justify his faith. His wealth seemed but half his own, so long as he had no child to inherit it. Possibly, therefore, in the reaction after unexpected success, in the prospect of a return of the Elamites in the next campaigning season, in the sickness of hope deferred, Abram's faith began to fail. To fortify this fainting faith, God granted a new revelation and a new promise. Both were as usual linked on to what had gone before, but both responded also to the need of the moment. After the events described in the preceding chapter the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Fear not, I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward."^a Thereupon Abram's heart opened to God, and the secret reason of his uneasiness found expression. He was living for the future, and there was as yet no sign that his house would have a future beyond his own lifetime. By faith he was claiming this land as an inheritance for a posterity which God had promised him; and he had not even one child of his own on which to rest this hope. Of what value to him were the wealth and possessions with which God had enriched, or might still further enrich him, when the only heir to whom they would descend was his house-steward, an alien, Eliezer of Damascus?^b He was going childless to his grave; his own nearest kinsman neither regarded nor deserved the inheritance of the promise; this slave, born in his household, would step into his worldly possessions, and where should the promise find an heir or fulfilment?

This mingling of faith and fear, this frank admission of perplexity in a heart that clings to its

^a R. V. *margin*, gives "Thy reward shall be exceeding great," a rendering which accords better with the reply which follows.

^b R. V. "Dammesek Eliezer;" others explain "Damascus the city of Eliezer."

belief in God, is just the attitude to which God grants a further revelation of His will. The reply was very gracious. Again the word of the Lord came to Abram, and this time with the express assurance, now first conveyed to him, that a child of his own should be born, and become his heir. And then leading his servant out beneath the night sky, God bade him try to count the countless stars, and assured him that his descendants should be as countless in their multitude. Thus the promise, made first at Haran, and repeated at Moreh and at Bethel, given now for the fourth time, becomes again more definite; but in its greater definiteness it demands a greater faith.

27. ABRAM'S RIGHTEOUSNESS (cf. Romans iv). Abram "believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness." The Patriarch's belief in the Lord was an enlightened and resolute renewal of the convictions which at the first brought him out of Haran. It included three things—a hearty acknowledgment of God's existence, power, and authority (cf. Heb. xi. 6.); a belief that this was truly the promise of God which had come to him; and a submissive trust in God's will and ability to reward His servant in His own way and at His own time. These are the elements of faith, and in Abram's case their existence was confirmed by his readiness to wait patiently and obediently upon God, "enduring as seeing Him who is invisible." The faith may have been still imperfect. Much was still hid from Abram which became part of saving faith to later generations. And, as we shall see, he was still far from fully understanding his own relation of complete dependence upon God for the fulfilment of the promise. But God, who looks on men, not only as they are, but as they are becoming, accepted his faith, and for the sake of it, accounted Abram as righteous, upright, in His sight.

This declaration is referred to by St Paul in his

Epistle to the Romans, where the great question is discussed, "How is a man justified in the sight of God—by works of the law, or by faith?" He takes the case of Abram at this time as an illustration of his contention that a man is justified by faith alone, and not by observance of the law, or of the ceremonies of the Mosaic legislation. For in Abram's case the very earliest ordinance, that of circumcision, was not yet imposed, still less was the Mosaic legislation, the Levitical ceremonial established. So that previously to the very existence of these things, therefore beyond all doubt independently of them, Abram was justified. He was justified by his trusting self-surrender, openly sealed by patient waiting upon God—by his faith.

28. PREPARATION FOR A COVENANT (Gen. xv. 7-11). God's favour to Abram at this time did not cease here. The faith with which he received the distinct promise of an heir of his own body was rewarded by a further repetition of the other part of the promise, that he should "inherit" this land in which he dwelt; and now the whole word of promise which had come to his inward ear was to be confirmed by sign and symbol to his outward vision. Agreements between man and man were wont to be confirmed then as now by impressive formalities; the contracting parties joined together in some symbolical act or ceremony, which was a visible pledge, or permanent memorial, of the contract between them. As, when after the flood God promised to afflict the earth no more in like manner, He gave the "bow in the cloud" to be a symbol of His promise; so now, in consideration of the weakness of His servant's faith, God condescended to bind Himself, as man did with man, confirming His solemn promise by ceremony and sign. When, in answer to the promise thus repeated in both its parts, Abram asked, not in unbelief, but in believing desire for a further revelation, how he

should be assured of his inheritance to be, God bade him make the necessary preparations for a solemn "covenant." Acting "on God's behalf," he was to take the animals commonly used for sacrifice, and deal with them according to the practice of men in such ceremonials. He took therefore a heifer, a she-goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigeon; and having slain them, and divided the bodies of the three larger animals in two, he arranged the severed parts in two rows, leaving a passage between. To complete the ceremony and seal the covenant, the contracting parties should walk between the divided bodies, either to signify that they invoked a similar treatment upon themselves, if they were unfaithful to their agreement, or to symbolise a union between themselves as intimate as that which belonged to the divided parts in life. But Abram's part was done in preparing for the covenant. He had now to wait and watch.

29. VISION OF THE FUTURE (Gen. xv. 12-16). All through the hot day Abram watched God's sacrifice, driving away from time to time the vultures which descended to prey upon the carcasses. Towards sunset, there fell upon him a heavy sleep, such as came upon Adam in the Garden of Eden. In this sleep he was overwhelmed with a sense of horror, as one in great darkness, and heard a proclamation concerning the future of his descendants, their sojourning and sore servitude in a land of strangers, but concerning also the judgment of the nation who oppressed them, and their ultimate return "with great substance" to the land of their inheritance. But not until four hundred years had elapsed should the land become theirs, because "the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet full."^a

^a The 400 years of the text must be taken to express in round numbers the period of 430 years, which in Ex. xii. 40, is assigned to "the sojourning of the children of Israel who dwelt in Egypt" (compare Acts vii. 7 with Gal. iii. 17). The "fourth generation" being evidently equivalent to the end of the 400 years, we must infer

For himself Abram received only the assurance that he should die in peace, "in a good old age."

This vision of the Patriarch pointed forward to the captivity of Israel in Egypt, to their deliverance "with a mighty hand and a stretched out arm," and to their subsequent return to conquer Canaan under Joshua. Abram learnt that the possession of the land was to be for himself *potential* only, but *real* for his descendants; that even their obtaining of it was to be after a long interval, and through suffering and struggle; and also, that even to fulfil His promise to the man and the people whom He had chosen, the Judge of all the earth could not do aught but what was righteous. The eventual conquest of Canaan by the Israelites was to be a judgment on the sins of the previous inhabitants (here indicated by the general name of "Amorites"), as well as a fulfilment of the promise to Abram. And great as their iniquity already was, it had still to run its course, before the judgment to follow could be indubitably deserved. The entering into possession of the land was therefore postponed, but the wide boundaries of the inheritance were now for the first time described to Abram. It was to include all the ground now covered by the ten tribes of earlier inhabitants, with whose names and localities he was familiar; and it should extend from the "great river, the river Euphrates" to the very border of Egypt.^a The unfaithfulness and inactivity of the people in

either that a "generation" was then reckoned as covering 100 years, or that in the chain, Levi-Kohath-Amram-Moses, some steps are passed over.

^a The fullest list is given here of the former peoples of Canaan. It begins with those living furthest south, and arranges them in geographical order as they would be found by one moving northwards in a zigzag line. In Ex. iii. 8; Deut. xx. 17, only six tribes are mentioned; and in Deut. vii. 1; Josh. iii. 10, there are seven, the Hivites being added.

The "river of Egypt" signifies not the Nile, but the stream now known as the Wady-el-Arish, which flows into the sea at the S.E. corner of the Mediterranean.

after days both delayed and curtailed the fulfilment of this promise. Yet for one short period, in the reign of Solomon, the kingdom of Israel did touch both these limits.

30. COMPLETION OF THE COVENANT (Gen. xv. 17-21). The vision ended, Abram awoke. The sun had gone down, and the symbols of the uncompleted covenant were still before him in the dark. Then for the first time since the gate of Eden closed upon Adam, the glory of the Lord appeared. In the form of "a smoking furnace and a burning lamp," a column of smoke with a glowing fiery heart, it moved down the passage between the severed carcasses. Thus it pleased God to manifest His presence, to fulfil the conditions customary in a human agreement, and as man with man, as friend with friend, to enter into covenant with Abram. "The wonderful mercy and kindness of God in thus binding Himself to a weak and sinful man cannot but have given him new thoughts of God and new thoughts of himself. He was now the Friend of God, taken up into a new world of thoughts and hopes; hiding in his heart the treasure of God's covenant, brooding over the infinite significance and hopefulness of his position as God's ally."^a

31. HAGAR (Gen. xvi. 1-6). As in Egypt Abram had been tempted to forestall the protecting care of God, and by human craft to secure his safety, so now he was tempted to adopt means of his own devising to hasten the fulfilment of that promise on which his heart was set. He was now eighty-five years of age. It was ten years since he had entered Canaan, to claim the land not only for himself but for his descendants. The promise on the strength of which he had taken this step had been several times repeated, and with each repetition had grown more definite. He was to be the father of a son; but was Sarai to be the mother of the child? There

^a Dods, Genesis, p. 145.

had been as yet no word from God to link her with the fulfilment of the promise ; and it now seemed extremely improbable that she would become the mother of the promised heir. It might be that another woman was to be this mother. It seems that when they had been ten years sojourning in Canaan, Sarai gave up any hope she may previously have cherished, of herself sharing in the realisation of the promise. She therefore suggested to the Patriarch, brooding over his childless state, that he should take one of his female slaves and make her his secondary or slave wife. This was in accordance with a practice at all times common in the East, and not regarded as either wrong or dishonourable. Any children that the slave-wife might bear would be counted as children of Sarai, and if she should bear a son, he would be Abram's heir. Abram accepted his wife's suggestion, and took to be his secondary wife one "Hagar, an Egyptian," a handmaid of Sarai, possibly one of the slaves whom Pharaoh had presented to Abram. It was a desperate, a foolish, and a presumptuous plan, and could only lead to mischief and confusion. The very success of the scheme served to increase the family troubles. Sarai seems to have been capable of feeling, and giving effect to, a generous impulse, but she had not the constancy to enable her to bear patiently its natural results. She could step aside, but she could not stand aside ; and when it appeared likely that Hagar would bear a child to Abram, her mistress felt that she had done a foolish thing. For Hagar, on her part, was uplifted with pride in the prospect of becoming the mother of that heir for whom the whole encampment had looked so long in vain. She began to carry herself already as the superior of her childless mistress. Then Sarai, in anger at the insolent behaviour of her maid, unreasonably threw the blame on Abram. And even the Patriarch's generosity failed him. He was

justified in upholding the authority of Sarai ; but he was bound no less to defend the woman whom he had treated as his wife. But he surrendered his right either to rebuke or to protect her, and replied to Sarai's complaint that Hagar was at her disposal, her slave, whom she might treat as she pleased. The jealous mistress used her authority without much mercy ; and at last Hagar sought an escape from her cruelty by fleeing from the camp.^a

32. HAGAR'S RETURN : BIRTH OF ISHMAEL (Gen. xvi. 7-16). Hagar fled southwards towards her native land of Egypt ; but she had only gone one or two days' journey in the wilderness that lay to the south of the pastures of Hebron, when she was stopped by God. She had reached the traveller's well between Kadesh and Bered, on the way to Shur, when "the angel of the Lord" met her, and having questioned her about her journey, bade her return and submit herself to her mistress. The command was accompanied by a promise. She was to become the mother of a son, and through him the ancestress of a great nation, "that shall not be numbered for multitude." Her son should grow up to be an independent ^b chief, "a wild ass among men," roving, headstrong, and untameable. But the name Ishmael (*God heareth*), by which she was to call him, would be a perpetual reminder that God had heard her cry in her affliction, and had watched even over the outcast. The heart of this half-heathen woman responded to the promise and the command. She recognised that she was under the eye of God, and acknowledged His presence in the

^a The name "Hagar" is probably connected with a root meaning "flight"; the same root appears in the word Hegira or Hejra, by which the Mohammedans describe the flight of their Prophet from Mecca, and from which they date their era (A.H. 1= A.D. 622).

^b "In the presence of his brethren" literally 'in the face of,' signifies probably 'over against,' 'independent': it may mean, however, 'to the east of'—see p. 31 note—and indicate the geographical position of the Ishmaelites in relation to the Israelites.

angel that spoke to her. After He had gone she perceived that He had been there,^a and she called on Him as "God of Seeing!" The well where this strange interview took place was afterwards called Beër-lahai-roi, 'the well of the living One who seeth me.' Hagar obeyed the command of God, and returned to Abram's encampment at Hebron. And there she became the mother of Ishmael, to whom all the Arab tribes of to-day trace back their pedigree. Thus from Abram through his first-born son have sprung Mohammed and Mohammedanism, as from him through his second son, Isaac, have sprung the Jews and the Founder of the Christian religion.

QUESTIONS AND POINTS FOR INQUIRY

1. *What is the essential idea of a "covenant"? How far is it fully realised in the transaction here recorded?*

2. *Explain "potential" possession, and illustrate the idea (a) from Abram in Canaan, (b) from the spiritual inheritance of Christians. Compare Eph. i. 14; 1 Pet. i. 4, 5.*

3. *What checked and curtailed the fulfilment of the promise? Describe the promise under the dispensation of Christ, which answers to the promise to Abraham. Compare 1 Cor. iii. 21-23; Gal. iii. 14 ff; Col. i. 12.*

4. *"Asking for a sign" (Gen. xv. 8); compare the cases of Gideon, Hezekiah, and Moses; Ahaz, Zedekiah, and the Jews in Christ's time.*

5. *In what way were Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, respectively, at fault in this episode?*

^a The word rendered 'looked' in v. 13 may possibly signify 'See the light'='live,' when the sense would be 'Do I still live after seeing God,' and the name of the well with a slightly different punctuation, would become, 'Well of living and seeing.'

CHAPTER IV.

ABRAHAM THE FRIEND OF GOD.

33. THE COVENANT RENEWED (Gen. xvii. 1-8). Thirteen years of Abram's life are passed over by the Bible record in silence. He was eighty-six years of age when Ishmael was born; he was ninety-nine when the next recorded revelation came to him from God. We may picture his life in the interval as one of prosperity and peace. Outwardly it was the life of a shepherd-chieftain, the head of a numerous body of dependants, making Mamre his head-quarters, from which his great flocks and herds, under charge of the herdsmen, could range all the neighbouring pastures at will. Inwardly it was a life of tranquillity and growing content. Ishmael would be growing up a brave, active and impetuous boy; in him the father saw his heir, the pledge of a posterity which should hold his name in reverence, and pass on the knowledge of God from generation to generation. But Ishmael did not represent the fulness of God's purpose or of His power; he was the representative of a human contrivance to anticipate the slow ripening of the promise. Abram was in danger of being content with less than God was prepared to give him; and from this danger he was roused by a new revelation, a new hope, and a new covenant. The new revelation was embodied in a new name by which God allowed Himself to be known by His servant. For when he was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to him, and said, "I am El Shaddai, God Almighty"; not a God whose will was to be fulfilled only in part, or by means of human expedients, or with results such as might satisfy a man, but a God Omnipotent whose purpose achieves itself completely, independently of man, and even in spite of human contrivances. And as every

revelation of the nature of God carries with it a corresponding obligation on the conduct of men, so to this revelation was added the precept it involved, "walk before Me, and be thou perfect." Abram was to order his daily life and conduct, as in the sight of such a God; and by patient trust and undivided loyalty to acknowledge his perfect dependence upon Him. Then while Abram fell on his face in humble recognition of the Majesty in whose presence he found himself, God "talked with him," and renewed in more explicit terms the former covenant with his servant. The three parts of the original promise made in Haran are now repeated with a new amplitude and greater clearness. There are again promised the Seed, the Land, and the Blessing. To the expectation of a numerous posterity is now added the assurance of royal dominion—"kings shall come out of thee." This promise must have struck the shepherd-chief who only "sojourned" in the land of Canaan, as very unlikely of fulfilment, but it was fulfilled according to the letter in the royal houses of Judah and of Israel, and still more richly, according to the spirit in Jesus Christ, "the prince of the kings of the earth," and in those, the children of Abram "by faith," whom He has made "kings and priests unto God and His Father." The inheritance, the land of Canaan, though not so fully defined here as elsewhere, is now assured, "for an everlasting possession." And the Blessing, about which the promise on the last three occasions of its repetition has been silent, now starts out into prominence, and expands to display its gracious contents. The covenant of God with man is not to cease with Abram; this strange and gracious fellowship is to continue with his descendants, "for an everlasting covenant." And the contents of this covenant are proclaimed at once most simply and most profoundly in the words, "I will be their God." God's choice of Abram and his

descendants to serve Him, was but the other side of His having given Himself to them to save them.

34. THE TRUE HEIR OF THE PROMISE (Gen. xvii. 15-21). The promise concerning a son was still to Abram only, and he continued, and was content, to look on Ishmael as his heir, the son through whom these great promises were to be fulfilled. If he had thus allowed his hope to fall below the level of God's power, he was now to have new possibilities opened to him, hopes long ago dismissed as vain revived, and his faith in God's Word still further tested. For Ishmael, the son of Abram and Hagar, his wife's handmaid, was not the true heir of the promise; and God now told Abram that he should have yet another child, a son of whom Sarai herself should be the mother, a true heir born of his true wife. This promise was so contrary to human expectation, at the time of life which both Abram and Sarai had reached, that on first hearing it, Abram was surprised into laughter; it seemed nothing else than absurd. He was partly disappointed also. He himself was quite satisfied with Ishmael as an heir. Why should not God be equally willing to accept the son of the bondwoman? Why should he be called upon to pass by the son of flesh and blood, this boy so strong and full of health and hope, to fix his attention and strain his expectation once more on a vague, shadowy, most improbable heir of promise? Abram's answer to this new promise was, therefore, a prayer that Ishmael might be accepted by God. But while God assured him in reply that Ishmael was not to be forgotten, that he should be blessed and multiplied, and become the ancestor of a royal house, He repeated at the same time the announcement, which so tried the Patriarch's faith, and quickened his love to the son he already had. Within a year from that time Sarai herself should bear a son, whom they should

call isaac ; and with *him* and *his* seed God would establish "an everlasting covenant."

35. THE COVENANT SEALED : A NEW NAME (Gen. xvii. 5, 15). As God at this time revealed Himself to Abram under a new title, which contained the revelation of His Almighty power, so on Abram also He conferred a new name, which was to be to him from henceforth the symbol of his destiny. The Hebrews at all times attached great importance to a man's name and its signification. In naming a child, the parents sought either to commemorate the circumstances of his birth, or to express their hopes for his future. A name thus came to be in many cases an index of character, or an evidence of life purpose.^a It was natural, therefore, that when a man's character developed, or the purpose of his life was changed, this should be outwardly indicated by a corresponding change of name. The great destiny to which Abram was called was now fully revealed to him ; and he who had hitherto been known by the vague title of Exalted Father, was henceforth to be called Abraham, "Father of a Multitude." The actual alteration was very slight, involving only the addition of a single letter, but its inner significance was very great, little less than sacramental. For it was ordained by God Himself ; it became a permanent memorial to Abraham of the grace and favour conferred upon him by God ; it was an outward and audible sign of the spiritual promise in the strength of which he lived. In like manner the name of Abraham's wife was to be changed, from Sarai "*the contentious*," to Sarah, "*princess*." The promise has now definitely expanded, so as to include the Mother as well as the Father of the

^a Conversely, the word "name" itself is used in the Bible to express all that is known or comprehended, or in the case of God revealed, concerning character or purpose. Compare Ps. xci. 14 ; John xvii. 6 ; Rev. ii. 17. See also "Shorter Catechism Primer," Q. 101.

Faithful. And on both alike the covenant is thus sealed on God's side by the change of names.

36. THE HUMAN SEAL OF THE COVENANT; CIRCUMCISION. (Gen. xvii. 9-14 ; 23-27). On a previous occasion the covenant had been ratified by God alone ; Abram had then acted only as a spectator. Now he also was to take part in the ratification, and set an outward and visible seal upon the covenant just concluded. It was to be a sign made in his own flesh, a sign made not without pain, a sign appointed by God to be a lasting memorial of the human obligation involved in the covenant. The sign chosen and ordained by God for this purpose was circumcision. The Patriarch and all the males of his family were to be circumcised. And as an eastern household, however large, was regarded as but forming one family under the headship of its master, every man belonging to the household whether by purchase or by birth, was to partake in this rite. Nor did the obligation apply to that generation only ; but every male child that should afterwards be born within the chosen family, must be circumcised on the eighth day from his birth, in token that he was the Lord's, and claimed, or had claimed for him by his parents, the covenant blessing along with the covenant responsibility. The penalty of disregarding this command was that the uncircumcised Israelite was to be cut off from his people, treated as a rebel and an outcast, deprived of the privileges, as he had rejected the duties, of the covenant.

It is probable that this rite of circumcision was not now practised for the first time, but had already been in use among other nations. Nor has it been confined in subsequent history to the descendants of Abraham, or to those nations which might conceivably have derived the custom from them. It has in fact been proved to be a custom prevalent among many peoples, widely scattered all over the

earth. But as with the other practice of sacrifice, so in the matter of circumcision, God chose a custom of human origin, consecrated it to the service of true religion, infused it with a religious meaning, and ordained it to be a permanent obligation on all the faithful descendants of Abraham. Its application to the service of the true religion lay primarily in this, that it distinguished by a permanent mark all generations of true Israelites from the heathen nations who surrounded them. The chosen people were to be a separated people; and circumcision was the outward mark of their separation. But there was also a deep symbolical meaning attaching to the institution. It was a sign of God's authority over the body of man. It was a figurative surrender of the whole body to God, an acknowledgment of the duty of suffering pain or loss at His command, a symbol carved upon the flesh of the inward consecration of the heart which was demanded of all true children of the covenant.

At a later time the regulations for circumcision were laid down with great precision in the Mosaic legislation, and it continued to be the seal of the covenant throughout the Old Testament dispensation. Under the new dispensation of the Gospel its place was taken by baptism. Baptism differed from circumcision in that the permanent outward mark was exchanged for a momentary ceremony. But they are alike in that both were ordained by God; both were applied as a seal of grace; both were to be used as a sign that every child born within the community of believers is born into the covenant; while on the other hand both were adapted also for those born outside the community of God's people, to be a sign of their conversion, submission, and reception into the covenant of mercy and promise. But even in the New Testament the idea of circumcision is still used figuratively to describe

the purification of heart, the laying aside of carnal passion and desire, the complete surrender of a man to God. ^a

Acting on this command Abraham himself received the mark of circumcision, and caused all the men of his household, beginning with Ishmael, his thirteen-year-old son, to be circumcised in like manner. The covenant made with the Head extended to the whole household, and thus the whole household shared in its ratification.

37. RENEWED PROMISE OF A SON BY SARAH (Gen. xviii. 1-15). Not long after the covenant had thus been renewed and sealed, Abraham received a new communication from God, under a new form of intercourse. God appeared to him and talked with him in the likeness of man. This was the "first fruits of a relationship, now fully established, which constituted this man and his family the friends of the Most High." Abraham was still dwelling beside the great terebinth-tree at Mamre, and there one day during the midday heat, as he sat under the tent-flap raised for shade and coolness, he looked up to find three men before him. They were standing mutely claiming the hospitality which is the right of every weary wayfarer in the East. And with that ready welcome and courteous reception of the stranger, which has always characterised the shepherd families of the East, and is still found among the Bedawins of today, Abraham rose and ran to meet them. Before one of the three figures, which was distinguished from the rest by some superior dignity, he bowed himself in reverent obeisance; and addressing him with deep respect as "My Lord," he asked that he might be allowed to offer the usual service to travellers, water to cleanse their travel-stained feet, a "morsel of bread" to "comfort their hearts," and rest under the shadow of the spreading tree.

^a Rom. ii. 28, 29; Col. ii. 11.

The offer being gravely accepted, Abraham hastened to give it a generous accomplishment. He caused an abundant pastoral meal to be prepared, cakes of fine flour, butter and milk, and a calf "tender and good" taken from his herd, and dressed by himself. These things he set before his guests, as they sat under the tree, and courteously stood by to minister to their wants.

Then it was made known to Abraham that his mysterious visitants were other than mere mortal men. For, having inquired where his wife Sarah was, and received the reply that she was within the tent, one of them addressed Abraham with an emphatic repetition of the strange, almost incredible promise, which was still echoing in his memory. "I will certainly return to thee when the season cometh round, and lo, Sarah, thy wife, shall have a son." The words were overheard by Sarah through the curtain of dark camel's-hair cloth, which hung in the door of the tent, and she laughed aloud with incredulity at a promise which she felt to be so unlikely of fulfilment. Whereupon, the stranger who had spoken, who is now openly called "the Lord," turned to Abraham and demanded, "Wherefore did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord?" And yet once again the promise was solemnly repeated. Sarah, now ashamed and trembling, tried to deny that she had laughed; but their guest, now directly addressing her, rebuked her with a stern emphasis on the fact, "Nay, but thou didst laugh."

38. THE DIVINE ERRAND TO SODOM (Gen. xviii. 16-21). The meal over, "the men" rose up to go; and Abraham set out to accompany them on their way. They were bound for Sodom. Their errand was not complete. Their divine mission of favour and grace to Abraham was to be followed in sharp contrast by a divine mission of judgment upon sin. And Abraham was admitted to know

the counsels of the Lord. The purpose of this visit to Sodom is revealed to him as they go. The reason for this lifting of the veil is set forth in the narrative as the thought of God. Abraham was the chosen depositary of divine revelation, and the channel of blessing to all nations. To him was entrusted the duty of teaching his children and his household, and through them the coming generations to "keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment." It concerned him therefore both to know the method, and to be assured of the righteousness, of God's dealings with mankind. Judgment as well as mercy was part of the all-important revelation with which he was charged. He who knew, and was a witness to, the grace of God in his own experience, must learn the righteous and holy wrath of God against sin, that he might be a witness to it also. Should God then hide from Abraham, His friend, His chosen prophet, what He was about to do? Acting on these reasons the Lord told Abraham, that because the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was very grievous, and the cry of them had come to His ears, He was going down now to visit and try these places, whether their character was really according to the report of it. The Divine errand to Sodom was an "inquisition for sin," an errand of investigation with a view to final judgment.

That God is thus represented as needing to go down to see if it was so, is only in harmony with the method and condition of the Divine manifestation observed throughout this chapter, a manifestation which was consistent throughout. The three men walked and talked, and ate like men; and yet Abraham recognised that he was in the actual presence of the Lord. We may say with some that these were three angels, commissioned with God's authority, and speaking in His name; or with others, that it was a momentary incarnation of the

Persons of the Trinity ; or with others, that God presented Himself in three human forms, answering to the three activities, of Promise, Judgment, and Deliverance, on which He was engaged. The manifestation was adapted to the knowledge and faith of the Patriarch. The revelation of the one Spiritual God was at its earliest dawn. Men still thought very humanly of the Deity ; they ascribed to Him the thoughts and feelings, to some extent the necessities and limitations of man. God allowed Himself to be known by them "as they were able," in such form as even they could recognise Him. With the progress of revelation and the deepening of faith, these earlier concessions to human inexperience were withdrawn. More and more God revealed Himself as a Spiritual Being, whose ways are not as our ways, neither His thoughts as our thoughts ; until *He* came, who as Son of Man and Son of God in Himself combined at their highest the manifestation of God in the flesh, and the revelation of God as "Spirit."

39. ABRAHAM'S INTERCESSION FOR SODOM (Gen. xviii. 22-33). Tradition still points out the spot, overlooking the "circle" of the Jordan and the doomed "Cities of the plain," where Abraham and his companions stopped. Two of "the men" went forward towards Sodom ; but Abraham "stood yet before the Lord." Then Abraham took it upon him to intercede with God on behalf of Sodom. With great earnestness, with a strange mixture of boldness and humility, seeming at one moment to forget, and at the next moment to be overwhelmed by, the distinction between himself and his Interlocutor, he pleaded for the city. The motive of his intercession was not, as we might have expected, a desire for the safety of his own kinsfolk, Lot and his family. It was in part compassion for the whole people, in whose defence he had once ventured his own life and property. It was in part also a pas-

sionate desire for the *honour of God*. The ground on which he urged his appeal was not God's compassion, but His justice. There might be righteous men even in Sodom; if they were involved in a common destruction with the wicked, God would seem to treat both classes alike. And He was judge of all the world. Should not He therefore "do right," act, that is, in accordance with the principles of fairness and justice which He had implanted in His creatures? In answer to the appeal so grounded, the Lord assured Abraham that if fifty righteous men were found in Sodom, the city should be spared for their sakes. Emboldened by this gracious answer to his prayer, Abraham went on suggesting fewer and fewer of the righteous to be the condition of mercy to the rest of the inhabitants. His importunity is balanced by his ever increasing humility; and five times his eager prayer is granted. At length he obtained the Lord's promise that if only ten righteous men were found in Sodom it should not be destroyed. Then the strange intercession ended. More could not either be asked or granted. The open communion between the Lord and His friend was over. The Lord "went His way;" and Abraham returned to his tents at Hebron.

It did not occur to Abraham that another course was possible for God. He thought only that the inhabitants must either be all destroyed or all spared. That God could or would spare a righteous few, or even a righteous individual, while destroying the wicked multitude, was beyond the Patriarch's present knowledge. Yet that was God's purpose and what He did.

40. THE TESTING OF SODOM (Gen. xix. 1-13).
 Meanwhile the two angels pursued their way towards Sodom; and coming there in the evening, found Lot seated in the gateway, in all eastern towns the regular resort and meeting place of the citizens. Lot, seeing the strangers, rose respectfully

to greet them, and offered them the shelter and hospitality of his house for the night. They at first declined, but as he urged them, consented. Whereupon he led them to his dwelling and made ready for them a feast. Lot had thus an opportunity to display his good qualities, of courtesy, reverence for strangers, and hospitality ; he was further called upon to show his courage in defence of his guests, and in defiance of his fellow-citizens. On them, too, the coming of the strangers acted as a test. It provoked an unmistakable display of the character and disposition of the citizens. They saw in the presence of these men only an opportunity to indulge in the shameless wickedness to which they had sunk. The whole body of the citizens, old and young, surrounded the house of Lot, demanding that his guests should be given up to them. When he refused and remonstrated, they mocked him as a foreigner, who presumed to criticise and control their conduct. In vain Lot exposed himself to their fury and tried to argue with them. They were attempting to make an entrance on the house by force, when the angels drew Lot within the door, and struck the men who were clamouring before it with blindness, "so that they wearied themselves to find the door."

Sodom might have learnt a lesson from the judgment which had come upon it at the hand of Chedorlaomer, and the unhoped-for deliverance through Abraham. But there had been no amendment in the life of the city. The prophet Ezekiel has traced the cause of its fall in the pregnant verses: "This was the iniquity of Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her, . . . and they were haughty, and committed abomination before Me: therefore I took them away."^a Their iniquity was full. They had exhausted even the long-suffering of God. Their conduct that night "cut the worn thread of His

^a Ezek. xvi. 49-50.

patience," and vindicated the righteousness of the judgment which followed. The angels announced to Lot the Divine sentence: "We will destroy this place, because the cry of them is waxen great before the Lord."

41. ESCAPE OF LOT (Gen. xix. 12-23, 26). The grace of God in sparing exceeded Abraham's boldness in asking. Though there were not found ten righteous men in Sodom to justify the sparing of the whole city, yet God answered the spirit of Abraham's prayer in providing an escape for Lot and his family. At the bidding of the angels, Lot went to warn his sons-in-law of the coming disaster, and summon them to join him in escaping with the rest of the family from Sodom. But these men treated his warning only as idle mocking. And, as the dawn was now breaking, the angels hastened Lot, urging him to take his wife and daughters and flee with them. As he still hesitated, they took both him and them by the hand, and forced them to quit the city, "the Lord being merciful to him." Once outside the city, Lot was commanded to escape for his life, neither looking behind him, nor staying in the plain, but seeking in the mountains a refuge from the impending doom. Still Lot failed fully to understand his danger, or the mercy that was being shown him. To the mountains he would not go; and he actually made the saving grace of God, as he understood it, the ground of a piteous request that he might still remain in the plain. He pointed to the village of Bela, or Zoar, not far distant^a; it was but small; its very insignificance might justify its being spared. He could not give up the comfort, the familiarity, the wealth of the fertile plain. He prayed that Zoar might be spared to

^a Zoar has generally, on the authority of Josephus, Jerome, and the Crusaders, been placed a little to the north-east of the *south* end of the Dead Sea. The identification is probably inaccurate, and the true site to be found in a side valley on the east side, but towards the north end of the sea.

become his dwelling-place. And God granted his prayer. It may well have been a grant in anger. Lot got his own way. God left him alone to his choice, "tame in earth's paddock, as her prize." And he disappears from the history, a worldly, self-indulgent, and degraded man.

The command not to look back was broken by one of the escaping party. Lot's wife, whose heart even God's judgment on Sodom and mercy to the family could not awe into indifference to the household gear she had reluctantly left behind, turned back to behold its fate; and "she became a pillar of salt," a symbol of the fate of those who while escaping still yearn after the City of Destruction.

42. DESTRUCTION OF SODOM (Gen. xix. 24-29). Early next morning Abraham hastened back to the place where he had stood before the Lord and interceded for Sodom. Had the condition for the sparing of the city been fulfilled? Had the Divine investigators found therein the ten righteous men? Abraham had not long to wait before he knew. Even before he reached the top of the ridge, from which there was a view of the Jordan valley, he could see the dense clouds of smoke which went up from the burning cities as the smoke of a furnace. The judgment had fallen. The Lord rained fire and brimstone out of heaven upon all the plain. The cities, probably constructed in large measure of bituminous and inflammable material, caught fire; the soil itself, which was pitted with bitumen wells, may have been kindled; the whole plain was wrapped in one vast conflagration, in which all those cities, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and all the vegetation were consumed and utterly destroyed. Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim disappeared; of the cities of the plain only Zoar, where Lot had taken refuge, escaped the catastrophe.

It was long supposed that the overthrow of Sodom was caused by the same volcanic convulsion which formed the Dead Sea, and that the waters of the sea covered the ruins of the cities of the plain. But this is not borne out by the testimony of Scripture, or by the geological history of the district. Scripture places the site of Sodom on the plain to the north of the Dead Sea, and consistently represents its after desolation as visible to succeeding generations. And the best grounded conclusion of geologists is that no disturbance of the level of the Dead Sea has taken place within historical times, either in its deeper northern portion, or at the much shallower southern end. Close adherence to the allusions in Scripture would lead us rather to see the cause of the catastrophe in a lightning-storm of unusual violence, accompanied perhaps by a shower of ignited meteoric stones; these with the lightning descending on a district impregnated with inflammable material, would give rise to this vast conflagration.

No catastrophe in the world's history has been more indelibly stamped on the face of the earth and on the memory of men. The Dead Sea basin still bears traces which mark either the causes or the result of the overthrow. The once fertile plain, which Lot had described as the garden of the Lord, was reduced to perfect sterility. "At the north end of the lake you may ride for a couple of hours before you reach the present ruins of Jericho; and all the way your horse's hoofs will sink through a salt crust into a friable mould some inches deep, in which nothing will grow."^a The bitumen being all burnt away has left only salt, which impregnates the whole soil as well as the waters of the lake, so that nothing can live in them. "The whole land is brimstone and salt and burning, so that it is not

^a Dykes, Abraham, p. 212.

sown, nor beareth, nor any grass groweth therein." ^a
 It is "the breeding-place of nettles and salt pits,
 and a perpetual desolation." ^b

Profane and sacred history alike testify to the profound impression which this event made on the memories of men. Josephus among the Jews, Tacitus and Strabo among the Romans, alike allude to the catastrophe, and ascribe it to "Divine fire," or to "lightning." For the writers of Scripture it became a perpetual type of God's anger and judgment against sin. ^c

QUESTIONS AND POINTS FOR INQUIRY.

1. *Distinguish carefully the promises to Ishmael and to Isaac.*
2. *What are the parts of the promise to Abraham. Show the gradual development of each part through the various repetitions of the promise.*
3. *Illustrate the importance attached to names and their significance among the Israelites.*
4. *What are the conditions of prevailing intercession?*
5. *Explain the term "anthropomorphic," and illustrate it from this chapter and other parts of Scripture.*

CHAPTER V.

THE GREAT TRIAL OF FAITH.

43. ABRAHAM SOJOURNING IN "THE NE-
 GEB" (Gen. xx. 1). Abraham had now for some fifteen years had a permanent settlement in the neighbourhood of Hebron "beside the oak of Mamre." But shortly after the destruction of Sodom, he broke up his encampment at Mamre, and moved

^a Deut. xxix. 23.

^b Zeph. ii. 9.

^c Cf. Jude vii.; 2 Peter iii. 7-12; Luke xvii. 28-33.

with his household and his flocks towards the south. The historian does not indicate the reason of this step. Possibly it was due to the shock produced upon the Patriarch's mind by these recent events, and a desire to quit the neighbourhood of the awful visitation; or possibly it arose from some passing necessity of his flocks. "The Negeb," which is always in our Bible rendered "the south country," was the name given to the rolling tableland to the south of Hebron; and there, between Kadesh and Shur, in the neighbourhood of the Well of Hagar's Vision, Abraham led once more for a season the wandering life of a nomad chief. In the course of his journeyings he descended the western slope of the plateau and came to Gerar. The site of this town has not been exactly identified, but it lay some ten or fifteen miles to the south of Gaza, on the plain between the mountains and the sea. This district was already in the occupation of the Philistines, and here, for the first time, Abraham comes into contact with the people who afterwards played so important a part in the history of his descendants.^a They seem to have been still a simple shepherd clan, who had not yet acquired the extensive influence, or developed the warlike disposition which belong to the Philistines of a later age. Their king, who resided at Gerar, was known as Abimelech ("*my father, the king*"), a name which was probably, like that of Pharaoh, a title adopted by each of a series of kings. The name, being compounded of two Hebrew words, is further an indication that these Philistines were either a branch of the Semitic stock, or, being, on the other hand, descended from Ham, had adopted a Semitic language. The question is still unde-

^a As it was with the Philistines who dwelt on the sea-coast that the Greeks first came in contact, it is from them that the whole country received the name of Palestine, by which it has been known to Western Europe.

cided ; but the weight of authority leans towards the latter of the two theories.

44. ABRAHAM IN GERAR (Gen. xx. 2-8). It might have been thought that Abraham had learned at least one lesson from his previous experience in a land of strangers. His experience in Egypt should have taught him that God's providence and protecting care does not require assistance from stratagem or doubtful policy in his servants. But either that lesson had been forgotten, or Abraham "ventured to presume in a culpable degree on a second interposition of God" in his favour. Once more, through fear of what might befall himself if it were known among the Philistines that Sarah was his wife, he gave out that she was his sister. And Abimelech, desiring no doubt to make an alliance with the now famous and influential chieftain, sent and took Sarah with the intention of making her his wife. But God once more interfered to protect his servant from the consequences of his own folly, and Sarah from the danger to which she was exposed. He "came to Abimelech in a dream by night," and warned him that he was under sentence of death because of this woman, who was really another's wife. The king replied, declaring his own innocence, and pleading the express statement of Abraham, in reliance on which he had acted. God recognised the justice of the plea, and the innocence of the king, but commanded him, on pain of death to himself and his household, to restore Sarah to her husband. The Divine Voice does not express approval of Abraham's conduct, but lets Abimelech know that, in spite of it, the Patriarch stands in a nearer relation to God than himself. He is by God's choice a prophet, a proclaimer of God's truth, and by God's favour and friendship an intercessor, a mediator of God's pardon. So faithful is God to this relation, that when Abraham shall pray even for the man he has wronged, the prayer

shall be answered. Though Abraham for a moment left his hold on God, the Divine Hand would not let him go. God vindicates those whom He has chosen, even against their own unfaithfulness.

45. ABIMELECH DISMISSES ABRAHAM (Gen. xx. 8-18). The king arose from this dream, and gathering together his household, informed them of the warning he had received. They acknowledged the dignity of the stranger who was thus protected, and were filled with fear at their own danger. Then, having summoned Abraham, Abimelech reproached him with the deceit he had practised. He had led the king to the verge of a great sin, and the kingdom into great peril. Abraham tried to justify himself in reply, pointing to the fear he had had for his own safety in a land where the "fear of God" was not. It was a self-accusing excuse, but Abimelech withheld further reproaches. His respect for Abraham as the protected friend of God overruled his indignation. He restored Sarah honourably to her husband. And having given him a handsome present of sheep and oxen, men-servants and women-servants, he generously invited the Patriarch to remain in his land, and settle in it wherever he pleased. He added also a special present of a thousand pieces of silver as quit-money for the apparent dishonour he had done to Sarah. This gift, he told her, was to be as "a covering of the eyes," to be a veil over the past, to make it as though it had not happened.^a Thus she was righted in the sight of all men.

Abraham then prayed for Abimelech, and the plague which had visited the royal household was removed. Nevertheless, the Patriarch's conduct at this time, his untruthfulness and want of trust in

^a R.V. "Behold *it* (the thousand pieces of silver) is for thee a covering of the eyes, . . . and before all men (*marg.*) thou art righted." Or, as others translate, "this is a satisfaction to thee for all that has befallen thee . . . and justice has been done thee."

God, appear in striking and unfavourable contrast with the magnanimity of the Philistine king, and the respect he showed towards a prophet of God.

46. BIRTH OF ISAAC, THE SON OF PROMISE (Gen. xxi. 1-7). After this rash experiment in providing for his own safety, Abraham probably left Gerar, and sojourned for a time in the neighbourhood of Beersheba. And then at length, when Abraham was a hundred years of age, the long-cherished promise of a son found its real fulfilment. Within the time foretold by the strange guest whom Abraham had entertained at Mamre, Sarah bore a son, who, as the offspring of Abraham's true and free-born wife, was the true heir of the promise. Great joy would fill the camp as it filled the hearts of the parents, at the birth of this boy. And the name, Isaac (*he laugheth*), which they gave to him in accordance with the word of the promise,^a was a testimony to their joy, as well as a memorial to them of the laughter of surprise and incredulity with which both the father and mother had first heard the promise of his birth.^b Sarah's own wondering joy and gratitude for her new motherhood found expression in a hymn or song, which is, as it were, a prelude to the song of Hannah in similar circumstances, and with it an anticipation of the great Magnificat of Mary, the Mother of the Child Jesus—

“ Laughter hath God prepared for me ;
 All who hear of it will laugh with me ;
 Who would have said to Abraham,
 ‘ Sarah giveth children to suck ’ ?
 For a son have I born to him in his old age.”

In this gift of a son the first part of the threefold promise had been fulfilled. Yet, just as Abraham only potentially possessed the Land, and as he only partially realised and received the Blessing, so even

^a Gen. xvii. 19.

^b Gen. xvii. 17; xviii. 12.

this son was only a partial fulfilment of this part of the promise in its fullest scope. Isaac was indeed the promised son; but he was at the same time a pledge of the long line of sons which should be born to inherit and transmit the covenant of God, and a pledge, also, of the supreme fulfilment of the promise in the coming and birth of the Son of Man. It was in the divine foreshadowing and foreseeing of this far-off birth, and its value for mankind, that Abraham could be said to "see the day" of the Son of Man.^a In rejoicing over Isaac he rejoiced over the pledge of the salvation of mankind.

47. **EXPULSION OF HAGAR** (Gen. xxi. 8-14). So soon as Isaac the free-born son appeared, Ishmael necessarily sank to the level of his slave-mother, from being heir of all that Abraham possessed to become himself part of the possessions which the new-born son would one day inherit. The weight of the father's affection would also quickly be transferred to him, the child of his old age and the true son of promise; and both Ishmael and his mother Hagar would soon learn that their position was gone. Sarah also would look with jealousy upon the brave and headstrong boy, who still had much to recommend him to his father's affection, and whose character and superiority in age might make him a dangerous rival to her own son. The feast with which Abraham celebrated the weaning of Isaac, gave her an opportunity for which she may have been looking. Instead of sharing in the general joy, Ishmael broke out in insulting mockery. Angered at the sight of this, Sarah demanded of Abraham that he should drive out both Hagar and her son from the family, in order that there might be no chance of Ishmael regarding himself as co-heir with Isaac. Abraham, who still loved his first-born son, was very unwilling to deal thus hardly with him, and

^a See John viii. 56.

to lose him from his sight. But God commanded him to hearken to the words of his wife, and do as she had said. For it was in Isaac that his true posterity should be found. Abraham was called to be the founder, not of a warlike, but of a religious nation. He must part from Ishmael, who should indeed become the father of a nation, but of a warlike one^a; he must concentrate his affection and his training upon Isaac, who was the heir of the promise of spiritual blessing to "all families of the earth." To him alone was to descend the saving fellowship with God.

Abraham sorrowfully obeyed. He took Hagar and her son, who would now be about sixteen or seventeen years of age, and having provided the mother with bread, and a skin of water over her shoulder, dismissed them together from the camp to seek for themselves another home.

48. HAGAR IN THE WILDERNESS (Gen. xxi. 14-21). Mother and son departed from the old camp to wander in the neighbouring wilderness of Beersheba. When the water-skin was exhausted, they found no well from which to refill it. At last, utterly spent with heat and thirst, the lad could go no further. Hagar in despair laid him down underneath one of the branchy bushes of the desert, that, if he must die, he might at least die under its shade. And, herself unable to bear the sight of his suffering, she went away, and sat down about "a bowshot off"—to wait. But though Ishmael had been sent away from his father's tents, he was not sent away from his father's God. Isaac had been chosen, but Ishmael was not forgotten. God heard the cry of his pain and despair, and by the voice of an angel bid Hagar arise herself and lift up the lad. For God had a purpose for him also as well as for Isaac. He was not to die in the wilderness. He was to

^a See Gen. xvi. 10-12.

become a great nation. And then God "opened the eyes" of the mother, and "she saw a well, and went and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink." Ishmael revived, and they continued their journey together. He settled in the wilderness of Paran, beyond the southern border of Canaan, where he became an archer or hunter, and "God was with him." In due time he was married to an Egyptian, one of his mother's countrywomen, and from him are descended the Arab and Bedawin tribes of to-day.^a

49. ABRAHAM'S TREATY WITH ABIMELECH (Gen. xxi. 22-33). Abimelech had not forgotten either the dignity and power of his Hebrew visitor, or the distrust caused by his conduct at Gerar. Abraham was still in his near neighbourhood, and, the herds and herdsmen of the two chiefs ranging over the same pasture-ground, there was constant danger of misunderstanding and dispute. Abimelech, therefore, accompanied by Phichol, his chief officer, sought out Abraham, and proposed that there should be a solemn treaty of peace and honourable dealing between them; that Abraham should "swear by God" not to "deal falsely" either with the king of Gerar or with any of his descendants. The Patriarch consented to such a treaty, but had a complaint to make on his side also. His men had dug a well in the district, which was a work of great labour, and added greatly to the value, for its possessors, of the surrounding pasture. But the well had been seized by the servants of Abimelech. Abimelech replied that this had been done without his approval, and even without his knowledge; and the treaty was concluded. In witness whereof, Abraham delivered to Abimelech seven ewe lambs, the complete or perfect number seven signifying the solemnity of the agreement. From this transaction

^a See Gen. xxv. 12 ff.; 1 Chron. i. 29.

the well received the name of Beersheba—the “Well of Seven,” or, as binding oneself by the number seven was equivalent to an oath, the “Well of the Oath.” Abraham further marked the place by planting a tamarisk-tree, and by calling there upon the name of “the Lord, the everlasting God.” Beersheba became, in later times, the southern frontier of the land of Israel; so that Abraham’s name is associated with the two extreme points of the country occupied by his descendants, with Dan through his victory over the Elamites, and with Beersheba through his treaty with Abimelech. The site of Beersheba has been successfully identified. It is still famous for its well, a favourite resort of shepherd tribes, and a place of tamarisks.

50. THE SUPREME TRIAL OF ABRAHAM’S FAITH—(a) THE COMMAND (Gen. xxii. 1-2). The twelve or fifteen years which followed the weaning of Isaac and the expulsion of Ishmael, are passed over in silence by the Bible narrative. They must have been years of quiet prosperity and peace of mind, during which Abraham, meditating on the goodness and faithfulness of God towards him, rested in the realisation of the hope of his lifetime, and contentedly watched the growth of his son. He may well have thought that God had made the last demand on his faith, that he had no more to learn, no more to suffer. Yet at the end of these years there was waiting for him the supreme trial of his faith, for which all the preceding moments of trial and victory, all the preceding years of meditation and peace, had been preparing and training him. At the end of this time, when Isaac was grown almost to manhood, the Divine Voice came to Abraham, bidding him take this his son, go with him into “the land of Moriah,” and there offer him for a burnt-offering to God.

51. (b) WHAT THIS COMMAND MEANT

FOR ABRAHAM. This was a demand for the sacrifice, final and complete, of the most precious thing that Abraham had. It was "his son, his only son Isaac," on whom he had, since the dismissal of Ishmael, concentrated all his affection and all his hope, that he was now to give up. And in Abraham's case the natural affection of a father was multiplied by the long years of expectation, during which he had looked for this son; by the hope of posterity which was bound up in him, and by the unspeakable value of that inheritance, of which he had been taught by God to see in Isaac the channel to mankind. At the command of God he had already surrendered one son. This further demand involved the giving up both of natural affection and of religious expectation. In Isaac he would surrender both the pledge and the possibility of the promised Seed, Land, and Blessing, on the strength of which he had cut himself off from his kindred, and in dependence on which he had lived these many years in Canaan.

52. (c) **WHAT THIS COMMAND DID NOT MEAN FOR ABRAHAM.** In the command to put his son to death Abraham did not feel that he was called to perform an act of *cruelty*, or of tyrannical violence, a wrong against Isaac. According to the views which have prevailed in most early communities, the right of a father over his sons was regarded as absolute and beyond challenge. They were his property, to do with them as he pleased. As against his ownership of them they owned nothing, not even their lives. Neither could Abraham regard what he was summoned to do as a *crime*, a wrong against society. For the society of his day, like most societies at a similar stage of civilisation, recognised his power of life and death over his son, and tolerated such an exercise of it, even regarded it in certain circumstances as a man's highest duty, a supreme act of

worship and propitiation of the gods.^a Nor, again, must we suppose that Abraham looked on human sacrifice as a *sin*, a wrong against God's law. That it is so, was, in fact, part of the lesson he was to learn. God speaks to men through their conscience. The Divine Voice never speaks contrary to conscience. It never bids men do what they know to be wrong. So far as Abraham yet knew, human sacrifice was pleasing to God. It was practised by the nations round about him. To their gods he had seen them offering their best, even their children. Was he to withhold *his* best from the God whom he worshipped, whom he rightly held to be very far exalted above the gods of his neighbours, who, moreover, had so richly blessed and prospered him? The command came to Abraham that he might learn in the clearest way that *his* God differed in this also from the gods of the neighbouring tribes,—that He did not require human sacrifice to honour or propitiate Him, while, at the same time, He did require the absolute surrender to Him of human hearts and wills. The human sacrifice which the true God requires and accepts, does not die but live.

53. ABRAHAM PREPARES TO SACRIFICE HIS SON (Gen. xxii. 3-10; *cf.* Heb. xi. 17-19). Abraham's obedience was prompt and complete. Even before he left the tents at Beersheba, he had already in heart surrendered his son. But down to the last detail of the painful journey and the preparations for the sacrifice, the outward evidence of the surrender must be complete also. Early in the morning, Abraham rose and took Isaac and two of his serving-men, and set out for the place towards which God directed his steps. The "land of Moriah," whither he journeyed, is probably the hilly plateau which afterwards became the site of Jerusalem.

^a Compare the action of the King of Moab, 2 Kings iii. 27; also 2 Kings xvi. 3; Ps. cvi. 37, 38; Gen. xix. 5; also the case of Agamemnon and Iphigenia.

The Mosque of Omar, which now stands on the site of the Jewish Temple, encloses the rock which is traditionally supposed to be the scene of the "sacrifice." On the third day of their journey, Abraham came in sight of the place, and leaving the men behind, went forward himself with Isaac "to worship and come again." The wood which Abraham had carefully prepared for the sacrifice was borne by Isaac; the father carried the fire and the knife. On the way, the young man asked his father what they were to do for a lamb for the offering, and Abraham replied that God Himself would provide the lamb. Arrived at the appointed spot, Abraham built an altar, arranged the wood upon it, and then, having bound Isaac and placed him upon the altar, he "stretched forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son." There is no indication of resistance, or even of refusal, on the part of Isaac. He had faith in his father, even as his father had faith in God. He proved himself by his submission to be Abraham's true heir.

54. GOD PROVIDES A SUBSTITUTE (Gen. xxii. 11-14). God asked, and could ask, no more of His servant. In will, in purpose, in spirit, he had made entire sacrifice of his son. At that moment God interposed. A voice from heaven called out to Abraham to stay his hand and not to slay his son, "for now I know that thou fearest God, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from Me." And Abraham looked round and saw a ram caught by the horns in the neighbouring bushes, and he took the ram, and slew it, and offered it as a burnt-offering in the place of Isaac. In memory of this gracious provision of a substitute he called the name of the place Jehovah-jireh, "the Lord provides" ^a; and thence arose a proverbial ex-

^a Literally as in A. V. "The Lord seeth"; but, as is recognised in R. V., the word carries the significance of seeing a need, and meeting it; the same word is translated "will provide" in xxii. 8.

pression, "In the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

That God did not need human sacrifice ; that He did require the entire surrender of His servant's will ; that He accepted one life in substitution for another, and allowed for a time animal life to stand symbolically for the human life that was owed to him ; that when faith has done, and love has suffered, its uttermost, the Lord doth provide ; these were the lessons which Abraham was to learn from this great trial. He had given a new and final proof of his faith. He had counted his son less dear than his perfect loyalty to God. He is thus an Old Testament illustration of the spirit which Christ requires in His disciples, that spirit which counts devotion to Him even a higher claim than the claims of earthly affection.^a And in the perfection of his self-surrender Abraham reflected in the clearest way possible to a man, part of the character of God. In his willingness to give up his son we see at the beginning of the history of Redemption a type or picture of the manner of its consummation, when God "Himself spared not His own Son, but freely gave Him up for us all."

55. THE PROMISE AGAIN REPEATED (Gen. xxii. 14-19). Abraham's faith and obedience in this trial did not go without a reward. The Divine Voice addressed him a second time, and repeated once again, in stronger terms than ever before, the great Promise. The inheritance in the Land is not again referred to, but the promise of the Seed and the Blessing is abundantly confirmed. It is confirmed even by an oath, "I have sworn by Myself;" for the first time in his intercourse with men God binds Himself by this human form. Thus richly rewarded and blessed, Abraham returned to his men, and with them to his tents at Beersheba.

^a Cf. Matt. x. 37 ; Luke xiv. 26.

QUESTIONS AND FURTHER POINTS.

1. *Why was the departure of Ishmael necessary for the working of God's purpose?*

2. *What spiritual application does St. Paul make of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael?*

3. *What is the meaning of the word 'tempt'? In what sense, for what purpose, and under what conditions does God tempt men? Compare 1 Cor. x. 13; 2 Pet. ii. 9; Jas. i. 13.*

4. *What application does St. James make of the sacrifice of Isaac?*

5.

*"Why comes temptation but for man to meet
And master, and make crouch beneath his foot,
And so be pedestalled in triumph?"*

Illustrate from the life of Abraham.

CHAPTER VI.

CLOSING YEARS AND DEATH.

56. DEATH OF SARAH (Gen. xxiii. 1-2). Again a period of some twenty years passes without recorded history. Abraham has meantime left the neighbourhood of Beersheba, and returned to his old dwelling-place near Hebron. Isaac grew up to ripe manhood under the care and training of his mother. She had been ninety-one years of age at the time of his birth, and died at the age of a hundred and twenty-seven. She is the only woman in the royal lineage of David, the sacred lineage of Christ, whose death is recorded. Sarah had an essential part in the founding of the people of redemption. She was the mother, as Abraham was the father, of the faithful. She shared with Abraham in the pain of leaving home and kindred

at his first migration. She shared for more than half a century in the Patriarch's wanderings, in his waiting for the fulfilment of the promise. How far she shared in the faith which moved and sustained him, we cannot say. She must, at least, have had faith in her husband's faith, and a growing conviction that the God before whom he lived, by whose will he shaped his life, was the Almighty God, and a rewarder of those that diligently seek Him. That she fell in with her husband's unwise policy on two occasions ; that she could be generous for a moment, and then angry at the result of her own generosity ; that she was at times unjust, passionate, and even cruel in her jealousy—we have seen in the course of the narrative. But when Abraham lost her, he lost a true partner of his life, of his hope, and of his joy in its realisation ; he received a warning that *his* part in the purpose of God was nearly at an end. The inheritance of privilege and of duty was about to descend upon Isaac.

57. ABRAHAM PURCHASES A PLACE OF BURIAL (Gen. xxiii. 3-20). Though he had been fifty years in the land, Abraham was not yet owner of any of the soil of Canaan.^a The death of Sarah made it necessary that he should acquire at least sufficient for the purpose of a grave. For, though still but a sojourner there, Abraham looked on Canaan as his home, and the assured inheritance of his seed. He had God's word for that. Otherwise he might very naturally have wished to carry the body of his wife back to the home and sepulchre of their kindred in Mesopotamia. But by burying it in Canaan he would, in the most solemn way, claim the land for his descendants, and show his faith in the promise ; even as Jacob did in after days, when he directed that his own body should not be buried

^a Cf. Heb. xi. 9, 13, 39.

in Egypt, but embalmed, to be carried back with his descendants when they returned to the Promised Land.^a Yet the land must be his own, and his by purchase, not by gift. As in his dealings with the King of Sodom Abraham recognised that what he had been enabled by God to achieve must not be met with any human recompence, so now he recognised that what God had assured to him as an inheritance, must not be received as a gift from human hands.

The land in the neighbourhood of Hebron was at this time in the possession of a Hittite tribe, an offshoot, probably, of the great Hittite kingdom of the north.^b When, therefore, Abraham went forth "from the presence of his dead," he sought the "sons of Heth," and asked them to grant unto him, the landless stranger and sojourner, a burying-place in the land. The negotiation proceeded in the grave and courteous fashion still observed in the East. The Hittites began by offering the Patriarch the choicest among their own sepulchres. Abraham waived aside their apparent generosity, and asked them to intercede for him with Ephron, the owner of the field which contained the cave of Machpelah, that he might sell the cave for "as much money as it was worth." Ephron, who was seated with the rest in the gate of the town, replied by offering both the cave and the field in which it stood, as a gift; and confirmed the offer by appealing to the

a See Gen xlix. 29-32.

b The existence, long duration, and great influence of the Hittite empire have been displayed through the discoveries of recent years. The Bible references to this people stood for long unconfirmed by external testimony, and disputed by some. But inscriptions lately discovered and deciphered in Asia Minor, in Syria, and elsewhere have proved that there was a great Hittite empire, extending at one time over Syria, Mesopotamia, and Asia Minor, having its capitals at Kadesh on the Orontes, and Carchemish on the Euphrates, which, for a thousand years, waged war on equal terms with Egypt and Assyria. Hebron, which "was built seven years before Zoan" (Num. xiii. 22), and Zoan itself (Tanis, in Egypt) probably mark stages in the southward movement of this powerful race.

witness of the bystanders. Upon Abraham again refusing to accept a gift of the ground, Ephron named four hundred shekels of silver as its value. Thereupon the bargain was struck. Abraham weighed out to Ephron the four hundred shekels, of the fineness which was "current with the merchant," and he became possessor of the ground, which was described with legal exactness as "the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field, and the cave that was therein, and all the trees that were in the field." And there, within the cave of Machpelah, Abraham laid the body of his wife.

58. PREPARATIONS FOR ISAAC'S MARRIAGE (Gen. xxiv. 1-9). The death of Sarah was to Abraham a warning that his own course was nearly run, and to Isaac the removal of the influence and companionship in which he had contentedly grown up. In both respects it prepared the way for the marriage of Isaac. To provide a wife for his son was in most early communities the duty of the father; and shortly after the death of Sarah Abraham took steps to this end. He was guided by two principles, which throw light on the motive of his life. His son's wife must not be a daughter out of one of the neighbouring Canaanite tribes; the Hebrew race to which the Sacred Inheritance and Blessing were committed, must not be intermingled with the present inhabitants of the land, who knew not God, and were indifferent to the promises. The wife for Isaac must be sought in the old country, among Abraham's own kin. Concerning these, he had heard recently that Nahor his brother had children,^a and that following the footsteps of his father Terah he had left Chaldea and settled in Padan-Aram or Mesopotamia. But Abraham was not less clear that Isaac must not

^a See Gen. xxii. 20 ff.

himself leave the promised land even to seek a wife among his father's kindred. The command to leave Haran was valid so long as the promise was unfulfilled. The son, like the father, must wait in the land to which God's promised blessing was attached.

Abraham, therefore, summoned Eliezer, his steward, "that ruled over all that he had," and entrusted to him the task of journeying to the old home and there choosing a wife for Isaac. He took a solemn oath of his servant that he would pass by "the daughters of the Canaanites, and take a maiden from among the Patriarch's own kinsfolk." Should she whom he chose, refuse to leave her home to marry a man she had never seen, Eliezer was to be free of his oath. Even that was not to be a pretext for Isaac to leave Canaan. The God who had brought the father forth for the very purpose of founding a nation, would overrule for the same purpose the destinies of the son.

59. JOURNEY OF ELIEZER (Gen. xxiv. 10-14). Taking with him a train of camels befitting his master's wealth and station, Eliezer journeyed into Mesopotamia. Outside the "city of Nahor," where he arrived towards evening, he halted his caravan beside a well. In much perplexity over the difficulty and importance of the mission he had undertaken, he prayed that God would grant him a sign to indicate the maiden who was "appointed" to be Isaac's wife. "The daughters of the men of the city" would be coming immediately to draw water. He would ask one of them to give him a drink of water. If she not only complied with this request, but offered further to give water to the camels also, he would take it as a sign that this was the chosen woman. The sign thus fixed upon was not a mere arbitrary one. It was an indication of character that Eliezer sought. Action such as he desired to see would show a readiness to help the stranger, eagerness even to outrun his request, and thoughtful

kindliness towards the beasts of burden, all great virtues in a pastoral home, and elements in a character which would mate well with Isaac's. Eliezer prayed that the indication of character which he sought, might be a true one.

60. REBECCA AT THE WELL (Gen. xxiv. 15-27). Eliezer's prayer was hardly finished, when there came out to draw water, Rebecca, the daughter of Bethuel Abraham's cousin, and granddaughter of his brother Nahor. The beauty and attractiveness of the young girl were at once apparent to Abraham's servant, and he decided to apply to her the test which he had chosen. Running forward to meet her as she came up the steps from the well with her pitcher full of water on her shoulder, he asked her to give him a drink. The girl quickly lowered the pitcher from her shoulder on to her hand, and allowed him to quench his thirst, and then looking round upon the train of thirsty camels in the background, she offered to draw water for them also. So "she hastened, and emptied her pitcher into the trough," which stood for the purpose at the mouth of the well, "and ran again unto the well to draw, and drew for all his camels." Eliezer watched her in silent astonishment and thankfulness. He could not but feel that his prayer was answered, and that this was the manner of woman "appointed" to be Isaac's wife. So when her task was at an end, he took out some of the gifts with which he was provided, a golden ring for the ear or forehead, and two heavy bracelets of gold; and presenting them to Rebecca, enquired who she was, and whether there was room in her father's house for him and his men to lodge. When she replied that she was the daughter of Bethuel, and granddaughter of Nahor, and frankly made Eliezer welcome to her father's house, he felt no longer any doubt that he had found what he sought. God had guided him to

the woman who, alike by birth and by character, was suited to be the wife of Isaac.

61. **THE MARRIAGE ARRANGED** (Gen. xxiv. 28-54). Leaving Eliezer and his train at the well, Rebecca ran back to the city to warn her mother's household of his coming. The head of the house at this time seems to have been her brother Laban, and he, when he heard his sister's story, hastened out to meet the stranger. He gave Eliezer a truly Eastern welcome, in the heartiness of his salutation, and in the abundance and thoughtfulness of the provision made for his beasts, as well as for himself. But Eliezer refused to eat until he had disburdened himself of his errand. He proceeded therefore to tell Laban who his master was, and of his wealth and family; he explained the purpose and the history of his journey; related how he had prayed to God for a sign to guide him, and how the sign had been fulfilled in the action of Rebecca. The thought that was in his mind became clear as the narrative proceeded, and he laid a proposal for the hand of Rebecca before the family with sufficient clearness, when he enquired whether they were prepared to show love and loyalty to his master. The answer of Laban and Bethuel showed that they recognised the hand of God in the matter; it was not for them either to resist or to approve. Without further parley they committed Rebecca to the care of Eliezer to take her back with him, to be "thy master's son's wife, as the Lord hath spoken." The negotiation being thus concluded, and his journey crowned with success, Eliezer produced rich gifts of gold and silver and fine raiment, and sealed the agreement by presenting them to the promised bride and her parents.

62. **THE BRIDE'S HOME-GOING** (Gen. xxiv. 54-67). Eliezer was impatient to complete his mission, and to gratify his master and his master's son by bringing home the bride. He spent the

night at Laban's house, but the next day he asked the family to allow him to return to Abraham. They tried to dissuade him from so hasty a departure ; but, as he persisted in his determination, they referred the decision to Rebecca. Her reply was one of prompt readiness to go with Eliezer. So they let her go, blessing her as she went,

“Thou art our sister,
Be the mother of thousands of ten thousands,
And may thy seed possess the gate of their enemies ;”

and she departed with Eliezer and the maid-servants who were to bear her company.

As they drew near the end of their journey, they saw the figure of Isaac in the distance. He had come up from the South Country, where he was now dwelling in the neighbourhood of Hagar's Well of Vision, to await Eliezer's return. He had gone out “to meditate in the field at the evening-tide” ; and he looked up and saw the caravan approaching. Rebecca, being told who it was they saw, modestly covered herself with her veil, and lighted down from her camel to meet Isaac. And he led her to the tent that had been his mother's, and “she became his wife ; and he loved her : and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.”

63. ABRAHAM'S DEATH (Gen. xxv. 7-10). The Bible records sufficiently for the guidance of other men the effect of Divine training and teaching on chosen men or a chosen people. It concerns itself with the life of a man as he is acted upon by God, as he responds, or refuses to respond, to the Divine Will. Accordingly, it omits much which secular biography counts important or interesting ; while, on the other hand, it chronicles and emphasises much that secular biography omits or lightly passes over. Abraham's function as the recipient of Divine revelation was completed when, in obedience to the Divine command, he had offered his son to God, and

received him back "as from the dead." His function in the purpose of God as the Founder of the household of faith was complete when he saw Isaac, his son, established in a household of his own. He continued to live for five-and-thirty years after Isaac's marriage, but these years are rapidly passed over in the Bible narrative, and his death is recorded rather as an event in the life of his son.

The one thing related concerning these years is that he again took a wife, whose name was Keturah; and that by her and other secondary wives he was the father of a number of sons. For these he made provision in his lifetime, and that there might be no rivalry between them and Isaac, sent them away to dwell in the east country. From them descended many of the nomadic tribes of Arabia. In Esau and Jacob, the sons who were born to Isaac some years before his own death, Abraham would rejoice to see a new pledge for the permanence of the family which he had founded.

Thus, according to the promise of former days,^a Abraham lived to "a good old age," a hundred and seventy-five years in all; and died "an old man and full of years." The cave of Machpelah, where he had laid the body of his wife, opened again to receive his own body, Isaac and Ishmael together paying the last honour to their father. Having afterwards received also the bones of Jacob, the "field of Machpelah" became a sacred place in the eyes of the Jews. In the time of the Crusaders, it became the site of a Christian church, and is now covered by a Mohammedan mosque. The followers of Mohammed, who also regard Abraham as the "Father of the Faithful," and the Bedawins especially, who call themselves still the "Tribe of Abraham," look on Machpelah as one of their most sacred places, and a scene of meritorious pilgrimage.

^a Gen. xv. 15.

64. CHARACTER OF ABRAHAM. Though the inspired historian selects only a few episodes in the life of Abraham, yet they are selected and presented in such a way as to give a clear impression of his character and its basis. The character is felt to be a *real* one. We see Abraham acting and being acted upon. The causes described explain the effects; the effects described pre-suppose the causes. The successive revelations which Abraham receives, are reflected in his conduct; his conduct at various crises in his life requires the revelation to account for it.

But at the same time it is a *human* character. It does not act mechanically. It is not constrained into perfect unison with the Divine Will. It can resist, it can fail to comprehend, it can come short of the fulness of Divine requirements. The Bible does not conceal weakness in its heroes. It does not ascribe to them completeness of knowledge of duty, or perfection of obedience. But it shows—and of this Abraham is an illustration—how a man is led, through God's dealing with him in the experience of life, to recognise the incompleteness of his knowledge or the insufficiency of his faith; and how by facing difficulties, into which God thus leads him, and laying them before God, to whom he still clings, he may make the very difficulties stepping-stones to larger knowledge and stronger faith.

In this manner Abraham's character *grew*, as his faith widened in comprehension and strengthened in grasp. For the character is based throughout upon faith; and it is a faith which grows. It grows in comprehension and in strength. It includes more and it does more. At the outset he left Haran, holding to a simple belief in one Supreme God, in His command, and in His promise. The training on which he then entered, opened the way to a larger knowledge of God as All-Mighty, All-Righteous, and All-Merciful: it caused the original

command to unfold and expand into a sense of duty and submission to the same God in other and minor matters also ; it taught him not to look for the fulfilment of the promise immediately, or in all its parts literally to himself. He learned that faith was "waiting patiently upon the Lord." As years went on, the fulfilment of the promises, except as concerned the son, retreated more and more into the future. Abraham's spiritual vision expanded to take in possibilities of Divine grace which lay beyond his own earthly life. Behind the Promise he laid hold on the Promiser. And at last, in the supreme trial of his faith, in the sacrifice of Isaac, he showed to what his faith had grown ; that he was willing to cling rather to God and His Word than even to those means which appeared indispensably necessary for the fulfilment of God's promise.

But the faith which grew thus in comprehension, grew also in strength, and widened in its application to his life. "Humble in faith he gave way to his cousin Lot ; mighty in faith he smote the four kings from the East ; steadfast in faith he rested despite all contradiction of reason and nature in the word of promise ; bold in faith he besought God for the deliverance of Sodom ; loyal in faith he submitted at God's command to the will of Sarah,"^a and parted with Ishmael his son. Thus from stage to stage he found application for his faith in conduct ; and his faith grew from strength to strength, till by the same faith he stood by the altar of Moriah, victor over his natural affection, victor over his opinion about how God's promise was to be fulfilled, and victor over himself.

Thus, having lived "as seeing Him who is invisible," Abraham was one of those who "died in faith, not having received the promises but having

^a *Delitzsch*, Genesis, p. 324.

seen them afar off." ^a Having thus lived and died in faith, he became "the father of all them that believe," of those that live and walk by like faith. And in virtue of the fellowship which through his faith was established between him and God,—the covenant which once made with him became the high inheritance of his race, Abraham was recognised by his posterity by that highest of all titles, "the Friend of God."

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2. *Show how Rebecca's conduct at the well displayed a character suitable and complementary to Isaac's.*

3. *Illustrate from case of Abraham and others the difference between Biblical and secular biographies—(a) in what they omit, (b) in what they record.*

4. *In what respects, and in connection with what events did Abraham increase in the knowledge of God?*

5. *Trace the continuance of the covenant Blessing (Gen. xvii. 7) to the children of Abraham. Compare Ex. xxix. 45, 46; Jer. xxxi. 1, 31-34; Ezek. xi. 19, 20, &c.*

6. *How was the blessing finally fulfilled? Compare John i. 14; Matt. xxviii. 20. Show how it continues to be enjoyed, and by whom. Compare 2 Cor. vi. 16-18; Rev. xxi. 7, &c.*

a Hebrews xi. 13.

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